

Sophie Farthing

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AI – Government Policy



In his introduction John Doherty pointed to Sophie's high level education and experience in the field of human rights law in the UK and Australia, culminating in her current role leading the Policy Lab at the HTI within the University of Technology Sydney.

Sophie described the Human Technology Lab as a multi-disciplinary organisation that applies human values to new and emerging technologies. It provides independent expert advice to government and organisations, identifying policies, tools, training and data science solutions to support human-centred technology. HTI brings together the best of academia, industry, government, and civil society to demonstrate how human values, including

human rights, can and should be imbued in emerging technologies.

Her talk focused on Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is revolutionising how we interact and communicate, receive information, and access services. First, she covered key definitions. There is no universally accepted definition of AI, rather the term covers a cluster of technologies. Put simply, AI involves an engineered system or computer program that generates outputs, fuelled by data, such as recommendations, forecasts or categorisations, for a set of human-defined objectives.

AI has increasingly formed part of the public conversation in recent years. There are a number of factors fuelling the rise of AI. The availability of massive data sets, increased computing power and the advances made in specific technologies relying on both of these things, such as machine learning algorithms and automation. In the past 12 to 18 months, we have also seen the emergence of 'generative AI' tools, which create text, images and video from written commands.

HTI approaches new and emerging technologies using a human-centred lens, informed by international human rights law. Human rights provide a set of substantive norms grounded in three core international agreements: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Conventions on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These documents, along with several other conventions, protect the civil and political freedoms that underpin Australian democracy, our right to equality and non-discrimination, and the rights to privacy and freedom of expression and assembly, the right to life and freedom from torture.

She discussed specific examples of how AI is impacting our human rights, both positively and negatively. AI is being used, for example, to better understand the capacity across emergency hospital departments in Queensland, and to give independence back to people with a disability, such as through the use of 'smart glasses' for people with a vision impairment. On the flip side, there are hugely concerning uses of AI that are threatening the very fabric of our society, such as the role of social media in distributing mis and dis-information, lethal autonomous weapons and curated news feeds that seek to influence democratic elections.

Given the complexities of the current debate, the key question is how do we ensure AI gives us the future we want, and not one that we fear?

Governments all over the world are grappling with this tricky policy question. The era of self-regulation by big technology companies has been proven to have significant shortfalls when it comes to protecting human rights and Australian society. What is required is a multifaceted regulatory response, one that is human-centred, and involves self-regulation and co-regulatory models, as well as hard-edged legal obligations.

The session finished with questions from the floor, covering the benefits—or limitations—of regulation, the need for strong community consultation and a constitutional question of whether the federal or state and territory governments should be taking the lead.

In proposing the vote of thanks, Sean Wareing expressed members' appreciation of Sophie's illuminating an area that for many of us is new and not easily understood. Given AI's potential for both good and bad, he reflected that managing both the benefits and the risks would be increasingly important for our generation and particularly for our children and grandchildren.

We are also very grateful to Sophie for providing a written summary, which is incorporated in the above

Peter James