AI policy, business, and politics: Where are we heading?

AI could change the planet and humanity. It could have a range of consequences, both good and bad, and could change the way we work, play, even fight. This webinar will explore the intersections of policy, business, and politics when it comes to AI. Firstly, looking at the effects on the United States. A more global outlook will be explored with the global results of increased AI usage, then finally, a turn to the long-term transformative effect of AI.

United States – Policy Debates and Election Outlook

Policymaking Context

There are different priorities when it comes to AI regulation. China prioritises the state, EU its citizens, and the US the commercial sector. However, all have concerns over national security, especially China and the US due to the competitive nature of their relationship. The EU and China have a much more unified vision for regulation. The US is far more nebulous with power being disseminated amongst the various centres of power within politics. Capitol Hill, the White House, the States, and the judiciary all have roles to play, which makes any federal law increasingly difficult.

The EU has soft, irregular, and evolving regulation, meaning they can be flexible and responsive to any change in an ever-changing industry. However, comprehensive regulation can become outdated and lock states and countries into unnecessary actions. The downside is that there is no real overarching vision, meaning companies must contend with a mix of regulation, ultimately leading to confusion. The debate currently being fought out by Republican lawmakers in the US is that AI companies should not be constrained by regulation in order to keep ahead of rivals. Other Republicans are concerned that regulation may just lead to less competition. Progressive Democrats are more concerned about transparency, bias, and the various social issues that come with AI. States are more concerned with labour markets and 'black box' algorithms and the hiring and firing of people. The debate has intensified over the last two years. Everyone agrees that some form of regulation is needed, but that is where the consensus ends.

Outlook: Trump v Biden

Any federal legislation would probably require a complete majority in both houses. Given the levels of polarisation, this is unlikely. Either president would likely have to rely on executive orders. President Joe Biden's approach is the safe and secure development of AI, ensuring that AI does not exacerbate societal harms like fraud and discrimination. Thoughts of national security are not emphasised, but maintaining the United States' global lead in AI, and investing in R&D are important. A focus is placed on cooperation with allies so that China does not leapfrog the West.

A Trump presidency would almost certainly view AI exclusively through a national security lens. Trump would likely keep the private sector unencumbered by any major regulation. Societal harms would be given a second thought at best. Whilst Trump is unpredictable, we can read into his executive order on AI back in 2019. Maintaining leadership on AI over China was at the forefront of this. It also led to the establishment of the National AI Office, which Biden the legislated into law later. This would likely be the wheelhouse of any AI policy under Trump in his second term.

Both presidents would aim to deny China to US AI tech, although Trump would be far more aggressive here than Biden.

AI and the November Election

Election officials are worried about malicious domestic and foreign actors. This is not a new phenomenon and could include bots spreading disinformation and using AI to create deepfakes. There is potential for all of this to come together and make this election even more divisive. Recently, voters in New Hampshire had a robocall from Biden telling them not to vote, which turned out to be

entirely fake. There have been rounds of AI generated images of Donald Trump with various demographics, in an attempt to boost his popularity with said demographics. Whilst generative AI is still in its infancy, it can still spread large amounts of misinformation.

Beyond the United States

Global Elections

Some 76 countries, containing half of the world's population, will hold elections this year. These will be the first major elections since ChatGPT and breakthroughs in image generation have gone mainstream. They will be coming at a time where generative AI can create convincing text, audio and pictures, free of charge or very cheaply. For instance, Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan while in prison gave an address proclaiming election victory, in a video created using AI. An entire private industry has formed where companies can spread disinformation for their clients. The increase of disinformation makes it harder to discern what is real and what is not, even for the trained eye. It takes a lot of skill to create a detailed deepfake, but it is difficult to spot the imperfections even in so-called 'cheapfakes' in the low quality, compressed images viewed through phones.

Military and Defence

OpenAI have reported that they are working with the US Department of Defense. Cutting-edge AI technology is almost all from the private sector. It could be used to strengthen security and defence, for example through mass surveillance of suspicious activities, where AI can process far more information far quicker than humans can. AI could also be used to create lethal autonomous weapons, with the ability to track and kill targets without ever having human interaction. OpenAI have said they will not assist in lethal technology, but militaries could develop this on their own. Most major players have come out against this sort of tech.

Risks to businesses

Businesses should tighten security, something AI can aid with. The most common cyberattack, phishing, could become ever more complex. Biometric systems could be breached by AI, especially with more convincing video/picture generation. Generative AI could be used to make new sophisticated malware, including ransomware. However, AI can also be used to battle this. AI can help identify new trends in cyberattacks. AI can also be used to run simulations if a company has ever had a breach and how it would cope with this. It could also be used to stress-test defences as well. AI can be a major security risk for organisations that are unprepared, but could also be a key part of any defence.

Economic Impacts

There appears to be a consensus that relatively high and medium-skill jobs are at risk. Anything that involves summarising text or writing computer code could in principle be at risk, although it is likely that AI will augment these jobs, not necessarily replace them. There are certain things that AI cannot replace, like childcare and nursing. Augmentation of AI could make at least part of the workforce redundant, though all business sectors stand to benefit from the use of AI. For example, in agriculture, AI is used to sense crop yields and irrigation levels, while in shipping, e-navigation systems can be used for maritime surveillance. AI may make some jobs redundant, but the productivity boost could be huge.

Long term transformative effect of AI

AI is a novel technology with unpredictable impacts. Popular analogies, such as electrification, can be helpful but also misleading. Considering multiple analogies simultaneously can give a better . It will be an enabler for all sorts of things, and the creator of things we cannot yet imagine. Like nuclear power, it could be revolutionary but there is also something innately scary about it. It could be like fossil fuels, where we become dependent on it but completely oblivious to the damage. It will create some entirely unforeseen circumstances.

AI requires a lot of resources to work, it gives off heat pollution and requires data, of which unrest remains about how that is acquired and who owns it. New kinds of data get invented all the time, it is entirely plausible that at some point in the future that satellite data from a range of countries could be used to capture high-definition, real time images of anyone, and use AI to track any person on earth 24/7.

Existential Threat or Distraction?

In the past century, two technologies have been created that do pose existential threats, nuclear weaponry and an economy built upon fossil fuels. Simply knowing about the risk is not enough to avert it. For AI to be an existential threat, it does not need to smarter than humans, it just needs to be a tool with a great destructive potential. For instance, it could be a software that infects the entirety of the internet, a problem that we cannot solve. However. there are a multitude of different possibilities with varying degrees of plausibility, we should spend time on risk but perhaps not on some Hollywood style global threat.

Conclusion – Hopes and Fears for the Future

Whilst AI could increase inequality amongst humanity, and perhaps have some deadly unforeseen consequences, the current competition has clouded the international community from talking about the risks. AI could reap rewards that ultimately benefit society. It could make humanity wealthier, safer, healthier. It could help the sustainability issue and the ageing issue. Ultimately, it could democratize the key essentials to a good life.