Opening Address

Human Rights in the Age of AI: Towards a New Generation of Human Rights

Brandon Hamber and Sophia Devlin[1]

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Good morning and a warm welcome to Ulster University. It is a pleasure to see such a diverse gathering of practitioners, students, scholars, technologists, policy makers, and community groups here for a conversation that could not be more timely or more urgent: Human Rights in the Age of AI.

My name is Professor Brandon Hamber and I am the John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace at Ulster University based at INCORE. I am also delighted to be here in my capacity as the Director of Innovation and a co-founder of TechEthics.

The mission of TechEthics is to bring ethical reflection into the heart of technological innovation. The founding of TechEthics has pushed us to engage with the deep structural, social, and moral questions that accompany emerging technologies. We have a specific interest in these questions in societies in conflict or emerging from conflict. This is challenging on many levels but also because much this field is also new and rapidly changing with advent of AI.

Today's discussion therefore focuses squarely on the issue of AI, human rights and ethics.

We are living through a moment in which artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping the world around us, whether in justice systems, labour markets, security practices, global governance structures, and how we make war and potentially peace.

Technology is reshaping the everyday ways people learn, connect, and express themselves. My business, as someone primarily working in peacebuilding, is essentially about relationships. But technology is profoundly changing how we see others, how we connect in new spaces, how we get to know or even think we know, others. This is not a minor change—arguably the fundamental nature of relationships is changing between humans as well as between humans and machines.

The relationship between technology and conflict is also complex.

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We have seen digital technologies fuel division, manipulate information, and entrench inequalities. At the same time, we have witnessed them facilitate dialogue, improve connection and knowledge about others, support early warning systems, and create new tools for accountability and participatory governance. Drones, for example, can unleash destructive military power, but can also track the movement of people under threat or map atrocities and help us better monitor and understand the impact of climate change to improve crop yields and alleviate poverty.

AI intensifies all these dynamics.

The impact of all this is rapid, diffuse and far-reaching. But the consequence is also uneven and deeply political. The financial investment into AI is unthinkably enormous. The resources needed to keep AI-systems functioning and expanding are environmentally destructive. A race is also underway between the various tech titans and governments to claim the spoils.

Prominent AI researcher, Stuart Russell has warned that such an AI race will inevitably lead to safety risks, cutting corners, and poor regulation all leading to the potential for autonomous AI to have catastrophic outcomes for humans that we did not take the time to consider properly.[2]

As such, and with any powerful technology, AI carries within it both immense promise and considerable risk.

I don't want to spoil your weekend TV binge, but there's a scene in the recent Apple TV drama *Pluribus* that might be useful here, at least for those not steeped in some AI debates. The show involves a hive-mind where humanity's collective knowledge is shared and allows anyone to perform complex tasks like flying a plane or conducting open-heart surgery. However, the protagonist, Carol, is not part of this hive. Yet the hive seems determined to service her every need.

Despite its ability to efficiently meet and even predict her needs, Carol's frustration at this new world leads her to jokingly in one scene request a hand grenade. Carol's minder arrives with the grenade and apologising for taking a bit of time to deliver it notes: "We thought you were probably being sarcastic, but we didn't want to take the chance. Were you being sarcastic?". The minder checks again if Carol truly wants the grenade, to which Carol says yes. The grenade is handed over with the final caution: "Please, be careful with that".

Spoiler alert: it does not end well.

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[2] Russell, S. (2019). *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*. London: Viking.

While the show creators insist the show is not about AI, it could be seen as a metaphor for a super-intelligent yet compliant, context-limited AI that follows commands without considering ethical implications or downstream consequences. At best, it depicts an AI system with limited guardrails.

Most importantly, it is not just the ethical limits of hive-minds that is problematic. The grenade scene also highlights Carol's realisation that, as a human user with access to an all-knowing obedient partner, she could exploit the hive's weaknesses for her own gain. She double-checks the limits later in the show asking the hive-mind if it will deliver an atomic bomb if she asks. After a few paltry attempts to dissuade her, the answer is once again, yes.

But as amusing as this thought experiment is, for those of us who work in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and post-conflict reconstruction, these are not abstract concerns. How AI can or cannot be used, today and projecting into the future, will have real-world consequences.

Furthermore, although Carol's own realisation that the hive could be exploited, is important in highlighting the potential for how these technologies can be misused by humans—the hive-mind Carol has confronted to this point in the show is largely docile only making a limited number of decisions itself (I should say I have not finished the show yet, and maybe this changes).

But what we know is that AI will ultimately be anything but passive—it can and will learn, create new ideas, and ultimately initiate actions by itself. AI is not simply a tool to be used for good or bad by humans. As Russell and Norvig have observed, AI is best understood as an agent acting on what it perceives in different environments.[3]

The risk of AI therefore is not only AI assisting Carol to acquire an atomic bomb, but AI independently acting in problematic ways. As Historian Yuval Noah Harari has said: "A hammer is a tool. An atom bomb is a tool. You decide to start a war and who to bomb. It doesn't walk over there and decide to detonate itself. AI can do that".[4]

Furthermore, it is not only in capacities of creating harm in conflict-ridden contexts that AI matters. In fragile and post-conflict societies, the stakes in relation to AI are also extraordinarily high. These are environments where trust in institutions is often low, social

[3] Russell, S. and Norvig, P. (2020) Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach. 4th Ed. Hoboken, NJ: Pearson.
[4] See https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/sapiens-author-yuval-noah-harari-warns-about-the-rise-of-autonomous-intelligence-ai-is-not-a-tool-it-is-an-agent/articleshow/119376458.cms

cohesion delicate, and the legacies of violence continue to shape daily life. Introducing AI tools, whether in policing, welfare allocation, border management, education, or political communication, without deep ethical consideration risks reinforcing structural harms and undermining the hard-won peace. In such contexts, a poorly designed or unregulated algorithm can have consequences far beyond its technical function—it can influence who is heard, who is marginalised, and whose rights are upheld or violated.

Positively, when guided by human rights and ethics, AI also has the capacity to strengthen peace processes. It can support equitable access to services, provide more effective monitoring of rights violations, enable more inclusive participation in policy and democratic processes, and help rebuild trust in institutions through responsible and rights-respecting governance and the efficient distribution of resources. Arguably, AI could guide us to make the right decisions about peace and maximise steps to prevent harm and strengthen the non-recurrence of violence.

All this is fundamentally why we are here today—that is, to examine how humanity can shape technology before technology reshapes humanity in ways we cannot reverse.

We need to ask how we can ensure the safe development and deployment of AI while remaining grounded in universal human rights. And how do we, together and in interdisciplinary ways, foster technological ecosystems that support, rather than undermine, dignity, justice, and peace?

We are fortunate to have with us an exceptionally distinguished panel of experts whose work spans ethics, governance, engineering, gender equality, and international co-operation. Their contributions will help us think critically and creatively about the future we want to build.

Before we begin, however, I would like to take a moment to thank the organisers who made today possible.

The team at TechEthics, Tony Robinson and Alan Largey; the Institute for Ethics in Artificial Intelligence at the Technical University of Munich; Ulster University School of Computing especially Professor Raymond Bond, Dr David Glass, and Professor Maurice Mulvenna; Ludwig-Maximilian University, and all the Ulster University event staff.

Your dedication to convening and facilitating these important discussions is deeply appreciated. Thank you all again for joining us. I look forward to the insights and discussions ahead, and to continuing this important conversation.

Thank you.