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The AI WRR report, new wine in old bottles?

There is hardly any organization that hasn't issued her ideas on the intrusive technology of Artificial Intelligence (AI). After more than two years of study by renowned practitioners from the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), also the WRR came up with a policy document on AI. The WRR presents itself as the independent strategic advisory body for government policy in the Netherlands. According to her introduction the WRR advises the Dutch government and Parliament on long-term strategic issues that are of great importance to society. The WRR provides science-based advice aimed at opening up new perspectives and directions, changing problem definitions, setting new policy goals, investigating new resources for problem solving, and enriching the public debate.

Although several organizations issued their vision on AI, the WRR of course has its own perspective: the WRR has coined the term 'system technology' and advised the government how to deal with the pervasive AI technology. This term is used for AI in an attempt to emphasize the systemic nature of its impact on society, compared to other examples of systems technologies such as the steam engine, electricity, the internal combustion engine, and the computer. Although clarifying it wasn't exactly a revolutionary vision, this comparison was also made several times in other publications and also by the European AI Alliance and the European White Paper on AI, going for an 'ecosystem of trust'. The use of systemic aspects is making clear that there is a system pervasive effect of these developments. The whole socio-economic society is influenced by these technologies. Without electricity, no machines, light or consumer and industrial goods, no energy, no internet; a complete different society. Of course one has to describe all opportunities and risks of such an pervasive technology. These principles are interchangeable with the foregoing technological revolutions. Also the principles and tasks presented by the WRR on AI in this light are not exactly revolutionary.

The human centred use and development of AI throughout society, and striving for AI consciousness and excellence has been the point of view of all European and interest group opinions and guidelines. The WRR in abstract is presenting this view as follows: Embedding system technologies within society entails five overarching tasks: 1. Demystification: tackling overly optimistic and pessimistic images and learning to focus on the right questions. 2. Contextualization: making the technology work in practice by creating an enabling socio-technical ecosystem. 3. Engagement: democratizing the technology by involving relevant actors, in particular civil society. 4. Regulation: developing appropriate regulatory frameworks that safeguard fundamental rights and values in the long-term. 5. Positioning: investing in competitiveness and assuring security in an international context.

Also this report doesn't escape the reference to fear and disaster. There are a lot of examples of effects used to make clear that the danger and accidents will ultimately lead to rules and safety. As an example is given in a rather pompous way 'battle of the street' between cars and pedestrians has led to the traffic rules. On the other hand the 'demystification' is directed to take away the fear. Reference is made to several SciFi films of course, but there is also reference to more down to earth examples. For example, the idea that AI is a black box is a myth that inhibits efforts to bring greater control and transparency to all kinds of applications of the technology. The WRR is of the opinion that AI and the underlying algorithms can be made transparent and this can be regulated as is also more or less the purpose of the draft AI Regulation. Maybe that applies to the current status but it will still be a 'mystery' if this is the case for self learning AI systems of the future. Anyway the advice is to educate the public about the reality of AI as was already presented in the government policy paper of the government two years ago. Also the advice to set up algorithm registers to facilitate public scrutiny was suggested there

and already applied in Helsinki and Amsterdam. I already doubted the practical use of such a register in a former contribution to this magazine.

For the position of the natural person in the 'AI revolution', the well known distinction of human in the loop as control, intervention or out of the loop when the system is autonomous in decision making is made on basis of article 15 of the GDPR which gives citizens the right to let a human decide in fields that may 'significantly affect' their lives.

This doesn't impede the further development of AI on the socio-economic level. WRR advises to develop a so-called national AI identity in strong industrial domains that are important building blocks of a country's economy, such as the automobile industry in Germany or agriculture in the Netherlands. Not to forget the sustainability and fundamental values, it can also include domains that embody important public values in a given society, like healthcare, ecology or governmental services.

In all the observations, remarks and advice, I did not notice anything I haven't read or heard before. That doesn't mean it is a useless report. It is a well structured and motivated document as was it a thesis. There are some interesting aspects though concerning arts of engagement. WRR warns for protests and campaign actions against AI manufacturing and users by civilians, kind of people with hayforks against trains in the 19th century. What is considered a positive engagement is the so-called monitoring of democracy, by scholars, journalists and interest groups that also inform the public about risks and ways of protecting fundamental rights. Further adequate feedback on AI systems is considered absolutely crucial, transparency of the system, be it medical, judicial or any other process with effect on natural persons, more or less comparable with the risk assessment requirements in the draft AI regulation. Concerning regulation the WRR advises to regulate risk applications of AI as stated in the draft regulation.

But of course chilling effects of regulating have to be avoided, Europe (Netherlands) has to find the competing edge to prevail in the AI industry! And yes we can, we (Europe) have an advanced fundamental research, but we need a dynamic private sector and an enabling government. Some strong points from countries are mentioned that are not really surprising, Germany and France in automotive AI, Russia in surveillance, and face recognition(sic!).

"It's all about accepting and understanding."

Also attention is given to the problematic question of autonomous weapons and the multifunctional use of drones, civil or military, that is the question… no specific advice in this.

And there is no serious document without some discussions about bias problems, discrimination and misuse including criminal use of (personal) data as deepfake with use of AI and more structural problems as the 'Infocalypse' and the rise of 'digital authoritarianism' to control and manipulate the population as in Russia and China. (And tech giants in the west?).

To structure this all as a national and European policy on AI it is advised to set up a governmental policy center. To finalize the analysis of the plus 500 pages document, I recommend to read the english summary.

In this summary in my opinion there is one paragraph that gives the essence of the whole document:

People who work with AI must be trained to understand what such systems can and cannot do, to understand the margins of error, and to distinguish correlation from causality. AI systems can undoubtedly do certain things better than human beings, but perform much worse than humans in other areas. What is required, then, is an understanding of how to deal with the fallibility of both humans and machines, after which we can focus on devising optimal combinations of both".

It's all about accepting and understanding, between humans as well as between humans and artificial systems.

About the author
Robert van den Hoven van Genderen is professor AI Robotlaw at the University of Lapland, director of the Centre for Law and Internet at the Law Faculty of the Vrije Universiteit and president of the Netherlands Association for AI & Robotlaw. Before his academic positions he worked a.o. as director Regulatory affairs in the Telecommunications industry.