All that glitters is not gold: Misuse of AI by big tech can harm developing countries
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Artificial Intelligence (AI) has generated considerable interest over the past few decades, owing to its promising applications across a wide range of fields. But, it has also sparked an ongoing debate on whether the risks of using AI outweigh its benefits. The biggest concern with AI is a lack of governance, which gives large companies (popularly called as the "Big Tech") unlimited access to private data. Multiple scandals in the recent past have confirmed the threats of this—such as the infamous Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018, in which Facebook conducted a major privacy breach by leaking confidential user information to a data-mining company. Moreover, although AI should be developed in a socially responsible way, governments often do not impose strict legislations on AI development, which may be detrimental—rather than beneficial—to the society.

In a new study published in Sustainable Development, Dr. Jon Truby of Qatar University talks about how unregulated AI is a threat to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—a set of guidelines created by the United Nations (UN) for the sustainable development of all countries. Dr. Truby points out that this threat is especially prevalent in developing nations, which often relax AI regulations to attract investments from the Big Tech. Dr. Truby explains, "In this study, I propose the need for proactive regulatory measures in AI development, which would help to ensure that AI operates to benefit sustainable development."

In his study, Dr. Truby discusses three examples to show how unregulated AI can be detrimental to SDGs. To begin with, he focuses on SDG 16, a goal that was developed to tackle corruption, organized crime, and terrorism. He explains that because AI is commonly used in national security databases, it can be misused by criminals to launder money or organize crime. This is especially relevant in developing countries, where input data may be easily accessible because of poor protective measures. Dr. Truby suggests that, to prevent this, there should be a risk assessment at each stage of AI development. Moreover, the AI software should be designed such that it is inaccessible when there is a threat of it being hacked. Such restrictions can minimize the risk of hackers obtaining access to the software.

Then, Dr. Truby takes the example of SDG 8, a goal that seeks to increase public access to financial services. AI is regularly used in financial institutions to make banking simpler and more efficient. But, while learning, AI might inadvertently develop certain biases, such as reducing financial opportunities for certain minorities. Dr. Truby explains that to avoid such biases, we need transparency in AI-driven processes. Human review and intervention at each step can ensure that such discrimination does not go unnoticed. Moreover, it is necessary to train software developers to recognize the harmful implications of biases, so that it can be regulated more efficiently.

Finally, Dr. Truby explains how AI is a threat to SDG 10, a goal that focuses on equal opportunity. He explains how AI can be used by big firms to generate employment opportunities in developing
countries and that this might threaten smaller businesses and local companies. However, if designed with sustainable development in mind, AI can create better job opportunities and increase productivity by removing labor-intensive jobs.

Inarguably, AI is a powerful technology that needs to be used carefully and efficiently. Although Dr. Truby is optimistic about the future implications of AI, he believes that developers and legislators should exercise caution through effective governance. He concludes, "The risks of AI to the society and the possible detriments to sustainable development can be severe if not managed correctly. On the flip side, regulating AI can be immensely beneficial to development, leading to people being more productive and more satisfied with their employment and opportunities."


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