



Of robots and rights

Dr Jackie Mallia

In 2019, Malta will create a National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (AI) in order to establish the country as a hub for investment in AI. Speaking about AI at the Delta Summit late last year, Prime Minister Dr Joseph Muscat stated that 'not only can we not stop change, but we have to embrace it with anticipation since it provides society with huge opportunities.' He followed up with similar declarations at the Malta Innovation Summit, also observing that in the future, 'we may reach a stage where robots may be given rights under the law.'

This latter statement seemed to generate unease. Reading some of the negative comments posted online, I realised that for many, the mention of 'AI' still conjures up images of the Terminator movies.

Although a machine possessing self-awareness, sentience, and consciousness may take decades to materialise, AI is already pervasive in our

lives. Many of us make use of intelligent assistants, be it Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri. Others use Google Nest to adjust their home's temperature. Then there are the millions with Netflix accounts whose content is ranked in order of assumed preference. All of it is convenient, and all of it is due to AI. But some of the skepticism towards the technology may be warranted. High-profile failures include Google Home Minis allegedly sending their owners' secretly recorded audio to Google. Facebook's chatbots, Alice and Bob, developed their own language to conduct private conversations, leading to their shutdown. In addition, there were two well-documented fatal autonomous car accidents in 2018.

AI is still evolving, but at the same time, it is becoming ubiquitous, which leads us to some very important questions. What is happening to the data that such systems are collecting about us? What decisions are the

devices taking, and to what extent are we even aware of them? Do we have a right to know the basis upon which such decisions are taken? If a machine's 'intelligence' is based on big data being fed to it in an automated manner, how do we ensure it remains free from bias? Can decisions taken by a machine be explained in a court of law? Who is liable?

A focus on the regulation of AI is not misplaced. The issues are real and present. But the answer is not to turn away from innovation. Progress will happen whether we want it to or not. Yes, we need 'to embrace it,' as Muscat stated, but we must do so in the most responsible way possible through appropriate strategy and optimal legislation. **T**

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