

XXI Infopoverty World Conference

THE DATA THAT WE ARE

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President of the Pontifical Academy for Life

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world is currently experiencing the “change of an age,” and we are more aware of that change than ever. While humanity has already lived through many periods of radical transformation, we are faced today with a technological innovation that is particularly “disruptive” both in its pace, which is ever faster, and in its pervasiveness, as it directly touches the life of, not only individuals, but of all society as well.

I’m referring to “emergent and convergent technologies” that allow us to intervene deeply within living matter, acting on the molecular basis of the human body. These technologies even lead us to the question of human life itself, changing our understanding of it and opening the possibility of modifying it as well.

Within this framework, we cannot avoid our responsibility for preventing disastrous outcomes. How can we stop humanity from becoming merely technological and instead humanize technology? How can we avoid being controlled by an “algoracracy,” that is, by the power of data and algorithms?

Shouldn't we develop a vision of society and of the future of our planet where

humans are the masters and not slaves?

First of all, I think it is important to avoid giving doctrinal or authoritarian power to either government or private business interests. But this avoidance is possible only if ethics is given a role, not only when a product is “built and in the box,” with nothing left to be done but to (try to) regulate its use. Rather, ethics should have a role during the whole process of research and development. We need an ethics that influences the criteria that underlie both algorithm design and the responsibilities of those who participate in the various stages of algorithm formulation. The goal in the new era of Artificial Intelligence is to ensure skilled and shared oversight of the processes that govern the interaction between humans and machines.

At this point, data become all-important. We must never forget that behind every byte collected there are real people. We can't forget that the data we collect and feed into artificial constructs are traces left by real human beings, even if we have no idea of who they are. Never forget that we profile real people, not mathematical models or simulations.

Careful however! No one member of society can carry this burden alone. Dialogue and cooperation among all parties are essential to ensuring that the interest uniting them is that of keeping our “common home” safe and providing for peaceful coexistence within the entire “human family.” Today, there is no area of activity that can do without a global perspective, particularly where technology is concerned.

Faced with the enormous challenges that technology presents, we are asked to take

a qualitative leap toward a peaceful future for our planet. Looking to history, we can see in today an analogy with what happened after the Second World War. After the dramatic experience of totalitarianism that had trampled on the dignity of peoples and on their cultures, the world took that qualitative moral leap and produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Dear friends, we must not wait for yet another moral disaster before we take action. We can and must take protective measures before something happens. As a human family, we must reaffirm and promote pro-actively the right of all peoples to live on this earth with their diversity and in peace.

The Rome Call for AI Ethics, promoted by the Pontifical Academy for Life in February 2020, whose first signatories were FAO, IBM, Microsoft and Italian Government (Paola Pisano was the minister in charge at that time), is a concrete example of what we can do together.

May I close my speech by leaving you a dream for the future? Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which is dedicated to universal fraternity, writes:

“Technology is constantly advancing, yet ‘how wonderful it would be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation could come with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us.’” (Fratelli Tutti, 31)

Thank you!