The AI Community and the United Nations: A Missing Global Conversation and a Closer Look at Social Good

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Abstract
This presentation examines the ways the AI community can and needs to engage today’s still pre-eminent global peace and security body, the United Nations (UN). With the rise in real-world applications of AI and an increasing emphasis on national funding toward military and security applications, there is a growing need to balance these survival issues with commensurate actions that provide immediate and long-term benefits to the social good. The 3D Transilient Framework (TF) is used to enhance understanding of the scope and nature of the social forces at play when looking at AI’s role in the social good (AISOC). Finally, I will advance specific ways for the AI community to take steps to engage the UN, and by doing so, increase the opportunities for AI based systems to contribute to the Social Good in strategic and currently underserved arenas.

The Problems and Possibility of Difference
Scientific and technological development do not happen in a social vacuum, yet often, insufficient attention is paid to their impact on society until those effects become critical. When the pace of change was less hectic, this was perhaps acceptable. However, technology’s exponential growth rate, increasingly leveraged by AI, may mean the social catch-up game that worked in the past, may no longer be a reasonable option. The burden of responsibility for social impact will increasingly fall on the shoulders of those devising these new technologies.

A case in point is cybersecurity, where those in the fields of encryption, tracking, and hacking are architects of personal, domestic and transnational security and shapers of tomorrow’s human rights. This work carries with it implicit responsibilities.

Additionally, with the tech-leveraged decrease in time from launch to an impact of a change in almost all social spheres, the implications for the AI community and its role in assuring a good society grows. Who else is going to be close enough to the trigger point? There are many ways to underscore the urgency of giving proper attention to this issue, and the timing of this Symposium is yet another indicator of this need.

Difference drives change in the tech and social worlds. But some differences destabilize whole environments. The destabilizing difference that deserves significant attention today arises from the differences in the rates of change of our physical technologies and our social technologies.

Our physical technologies are growing at an exponential rate that is by no means matched by our social technologies. Our social institutions, be they local, global, political, economic, social or scientific, change with great difficulty at best. This one difference that has the pace of change increasingly rapidly within unchanging social structures conjures various images, and to choose geological ones, volcanic eruptions or a tsunami. The forces at play eventually find their peace. The main difference between these analogies and what we see in society is a matter of our choosing.

While our social instruments and technologies such as charters of organizations, founding documents and organizations may not be etched in stone and are often thought of as living documents and organisms, in reality, most change sluggishly if at all. But we can initiate changes in these, changes that are usually resisted in part because we wish to avoid unintended consequences. At least we often rationalize in such a manner.

Many of our largest and most important organizations and institutions are mature hierarchical organizations. As such, they are not agile, they do not easily learn, and they are slow to adapt to their rapidly changing social environments. We see evidence of the consequences of this inflexibility emerging during our presidential elections and from the lack of governance adaptations worldwide. We see it in the inability of the international community to find ways to address the dire issues in Aleppo for example. So while our physical technologies are produced by leaning into change,
our social technologies remain the slow moving bodies against which the tech tsunami looms over and then crashes down upon.

It is important to note here that durable solutions to the growing turbulence surrounding technology’s impact and growing (or oscillating) globalization trends will not come from technology per se, but from making our social technologies—our organizations and institutions be they corporate, educational, governmental, social or communal—more agile, responsive and flexible.

The tech community is already doing what society is rewarding it to do—evolve better, more integrated, faster and farther-reaching technologies. But what is the ROI for the work of creating or updating where needed, innovative, adaptive social technologies? Who is focusing on and assessing this? Yet attending to what it takes to build into essential organizations, enhanced structural capacity that enables them to adequately respond to strategic challenges may well be a survival decision of the organization.

The cost of misjudging the need for innovating social structures, and perhaps even the organizations that themselves produce innovative technologies and thought leaders, if their structure has become a management-driven hierarchy, and even when...

The CEO is smart and (was) highly respected in his industry. Nevertheless, he and his people used a methodology for strategy execution that they automatically assumed would work. They never even stopped for a moment to think that they might be stuck in an outmoded system: a twentieth-century, single-system hierarchy that—no matter how heavily enhanced with strategy study groups, task forces, program managers, and consultants—put them at great risk from day one.1

The stakes of not dealing well with the strategic challenges society’s essential social institutions such as the UN are facing may not be known until it is too late. We have already seen evidence of this play out in Rwanda when thousands died because international political and legal instruments and capacities of the UN where not in place to deal adequately with emerging humanitarian tragedies. Is the UN and its various Councils ready to handing the increasing pace, scope and nature of twenty-first-century challenges?

The point here being that while the UN and mostly seems like some distant organization to be dealt with by the US government, there are strategic initiatives the AI and tech sectors can—even need—to pay attention to and impact. Can we risk misjudging the urgency of strategic action? It is the responsibility of globally minded citizens to find ways to enable essential institutions to innovate, adapt and change.

After all, tech and non-tech oriented individuals alike, are social beings and perform best when enabled by our social environments. So when social structures falter, because they are reaching the outer limits of their capacity to function well, there are consequences and for society, these can be tragic. Certainly humanity constantly faces the challenges of change, but now we are in an exponential age when the magnitude of external change is increasingly complex, there is good reason to take action and to do so proactively and from the perspective of opportunity and not just threat.

With the increasing awareness by society-at-large, of the social implications of technology and AI in particular, the contribution the AI community can make will be to step up to, engage in and help lead global-level conversations. This means, it is time the AI community engages society’s preeminent peace and development community, the United Nations. Engagement at this level, hand-in-hand with existing efforts within the industry and society is what will open up new possibilities for pivotal and timely partnerships.

Before outlining how these relationships can develop, we will first look more closely at what is meant by the “social good.” The three-dimensional Transilient Framework more fully outlined in United Nations Unlocked2 expands the simple definition of the social good as “a good or service that benefits the largest number of people in the largest possible way.” The framework also provides additional leadership intelligence for those wishing to refine their decision-making with respect to the social good.

### A Look at the Dimensions of the Social Good Using The Transilience Framework

There are four main elements associated with the Transilience Framework. It is important to note at the outset, that for each of these dimensions, there is no “right” or “wrong” position along an axis, just as there is no right or wrong place in any Cartesian system. What makes something right or wrong is determined by the social context and the meaning ascribed by the purposes and scope of work at hand. So for example, a position may be highly appropriate when considering personal level actions, but not when considering group, community, national or humanity-level (meta-humanity) considerations.

As the AI community, along with society as a whole, increasingly wrestles with the challenges of AI and the social good, these transilience vectors enable more insightful dis-

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2 Judd Smith, Karen A. United Nations Unlocked: The Missing Link the UN Needs to Tackle Global Terrorism and the Coming Tech Tsunami. , 2016. Print
Discussion of the social dimensions and their relevance. This then leads to new levels of leadership intelligence that can quickly be put to use, akin to the way a navigational chart informs the captain of a vessel when planning a voyage on land, sea, air or space.

**The Difference X-Axis**

This axis provides a way to assess whether the movement and the leadership needed is innovative change-leadership, management or deconstructionist. This axis puts innovation in the positive direction and maintenance or management of current systems and processes closer to the zero or present locus. Deconstructionist leadership is that which pulls backward, effectively undermining existing social structures and creating restrictive systems within which there is little to no room for difference or innovation.

**The Domain Z-Axis or Scope**

This axis indicates the variation in levels of human social interactions. The levels at which we seek to effect change range from the individual level through to the group, institutional, national and at times, to the meta-humanity level. Clearly noting the scope of intended impact helps us clarifies what is needed to complete those changes or to successfully manage tasks at hand. While this may seem obvious, often in social spheres, rhetoric may make it sound like work is being done at a larger level, when in fact, the body of work being done has a locus of actual service at lesser levels. Being aware of these different functional levels is critical to social effectiveness.

**The Drivers**

This axis is critical to insights regarding the complexity of social motives. It introduces how we operate as humans given that we have three brains, evolutionarily speaking, and each impacts our decision-making. Understanding that individuals and groups operate out of different mixes of these three drivers reminds us to factor into each effort, all three considerations: instinctual, emotional and rational. Lately, we have seen plenty of evidence of how the locus of transilient drivers lies closer to the instinctual region as it plays out politically in many a nationalist surge. We saw it in the Brexit vote and many elections worldwide. Fear rather has replaced growth and optimism and with this low-grade but growing fear-fever afoot, the fight and flight response seems to be heightened for each of us, and like a build-up of static electricity, needs to be managed.
Leaders acknowledging these underlying fears tend to become the preferred leaders. Those who consciously address these fears, by and large, do so aware that fear, pain, loss and scarcity are major motivators. Advertisers use the knowledge that emotions sell, reason comes later, justifying the sale. Others make use of this human pre-rational functioning through fear-mongering. We see this played out at all levels of our society from the private to the larger community and national levels. This blend of brains, so to speak, is what makes human relationships and the effectiveness of social institutions complex.

For the social good, what is needed are responsive and responsible approaches that engage the whole being: lizard-survival, limbic-social and logical-strategic. Without ensuring there is leadership that affirms the validity of our fears and ensures we are engaged creatively in solutions construction that factors in our social networks, we will often be left with the more fear-mongering style of leaders. Social leadership by solutions-mongers (for lack of more elegant words) will do the extra work to keep us focused on the urgent work of constructing solutions even while fears unsettle us. Too often, those providing rational and even well thought out solutions do so without engaging the whole person and underestimate the power of our instinctual and social drivers. And reason loosens out.

Therefore it is especially important in rationally oriented communities such as the AI and tech communities, not to disregard our lizard and limbic brains in the larger work for solutions. Without adequate recognition of the full range of social and emotional elements, rational solutions simply fall on deaf ears and will prove to be inadequate.

New Global Conversations

From the perspective of the evolution of AI and the significant interest from the public, media, and policy makers because of its capacity to impact all areas of society, there are global-level conversations that can not only allay unwarranted fears, but more importantly create opportunities for better addressing societal challenges. The engagement of the AI community with the international community can provide benefits in at least three key ways:

1. AI community can benefit from a mountain-top perspective of our global society.
2. The UN community could benefit from AI methods in tackling some of their issues.
3. The UN as a whole could, in the process of this new engagement, discover methods for increasing its relevance and agility and this will benefit our global community of which we are a part.

As far as social institutions go, the United Nations remains the pre-eminent peace and security organization with the largest scope (z-axis). Those involved in the UN Secretariat along with global-minded internationalists do think and function with a humanity-level mindset. But the majority of efforts at the UN are less than humanity-level. After all, it is not an organization with a global level mandate. It is the preeminent marketplace for negotiating national interests. Most international discussions and emergencies deal with our lowest minimum standards rather than the “what could be,” or the “what do we need to do now to better handle the challenges of the future.”

That being said, the UN still has a mountain-top view of our global society and its political, legal, development and humanitarian concerns. It is still a strategic community with an increasingly important role as we globalize. Unfortunately its World War II vestiges leave it heavily weighted on the difference-axis toward stasis. So as far as the UN’s change-leadership capacities go, it is in urgent need of an upgrade. The UN is not agile nor adaptive as our 21st-century global environs require. But it does continue to provide an international forum as well as some levels of stability, reliability and consistency, all important factors to stable and healthy relations.

The UN’s need to increase its agility and relevance in the 21st-century is where John Kotter’s “dual operating system” provides a concept for the evolution of organizational leadership in mature hierarchical organizations such as the United Nations. Additionally this approach to updating the UN system could be done through relatively small changes and without the need for a massive overhaul of the UN system. Innovation without requiring charter change

3 Charter Change has been discussed since the earliest days of the UN and even written into the charter. But to date, despite numer-
is of huge import to the UN because history has shown charter change to be all but impossible.

Adding this one currently missing significant conversation into being, even when it starts small, may well be one of the more strategic. Nations will out of their security and economic interests naturally increase their collaboration with the AI community. But given the innately global nature of the impact of AI, it is critical that the AI community also converse with those who have the larger humanity-level interests at heart and as their responsibility. Individual nations can be turned too easily in one direction or another.

Many perhaps already feel the urgency of this but have yet to formulate a rationalization that justifies the efforts and costs involved. One rationalization is very familiar, "A stitch in time..." Forward looking discussion unrestrained by crises can produce outcomes not possible when crisis hits. Discussions and engagement between the AI community and the UN started today, can begin the meta-humanity level solutions needed.

Two Birds, One Stone, Shrinking Time

One of the most strategic communities to indirectly help the UN with an upgrade may well be the AI community. The cybersecurity community is another, but regarding the longer arc of contribution to all aspects of peace and security, I believe AI can be more broad based and constructive.

Of course, it is not simple to jump into some meaningful engagement with the UN. The UN is a complex organization with limited ways for civil society to engage meaningfully. In part, this is why strategic meetings focusing in on the reframing of strategic problems is a good place to start: tackling the more challenging, resistant issues.

Instead of more traditional international conferences which of course can also take place, strategic interactions through structures such as meta-nets and other innovative network-like spaces can produce different out comes. Bringing non-traditional groups together in specifically structure spaces to brainstorm and formulate doable big opportunity approaches can help create new ways forward.

Providing new engagement processes for the mature hierarchical UN can help it address its strategic and urgent issues differently. Then, all parties benefit from the information exchanged as well as the experience of working together differently. Given the pace of today’s societal changes, researched and practiced versions of new arrangements such as these meta-nets are not only desirable but urgently needed.

All this is to say; there are successes out there that indicate that the transformational needs of the global community can be met, but some things need to be done differently. Extraordinary partnerships and opportunities can evolve and many can benefit. So while the AI and the UN communities maybe quite divergent in their day-to-day business, and rarely if ever crossing paths, their multidisciplinary nature coupled with an orientation toward strategic thinking gives them common ground.

A Way Forward

Direct engagement between the AI community and the UN in any formal or informal ways remains rather thin to date. However, there are avenues that can be pursued. The UN has a range of doorways available to those who know where they are, and who decide to walk through them.

Engaging the constellation of global level, real-world policy-makers, change-agents and staffers is an opportunity for learning and expansion. While not for everyone, this can also provide opportunities to explore new applications for AI.

There are many focus areas possible, whether it is with UN Data, UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to say nothing of the work connected with counterterrorism, peacebuilding, Member States technical capacity building and more.

Connecting with civil society alliances is another path that can be taken. There are many of these organized around the various areas of concern including the Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice that works with the UNODC on global policy development and in support of technical training in the crime prevention and criminal justice, treaty implementation as well as counter terrorism, and so on.

It Is What We Do Today That Shapes Tomorrow

In the end, it is the actions taken by individuals and groups that shapes history. The AI community is one of today’s more pivotal groups.

While we each return to our labs, our desks and communities to continue our work, how we integrate insights, shift priorities, and devise different methods for old tasks is what traces out the arc of science and technology. Then too, as global citizens, each person has the chance to expand their thinking, to include all aspects of their humanity (survival-social-strategic) and to sustain or change how they engage in the critical conversations that shape our future our collective future.
Appendix

Topics Addressed by UNODC:
This gives some idea of the scope of work of one agency of the UN. These subjects do not include others covered by the Secretariat, ECOSOC, the General Assembly and the Security Council, each of which have their specific responsibilities for which the AI community could have input.
Alternative development (alternatives for drug production)
Corruption
Crime prevention and criminal justice
Drug prevention, treatment and care
Drug trafficking
Firearms
Fraudulent medicines
HIV and AIDS
Human trafficking and migrant smuggling
Money-laundering
Organized crime
Maritime crime and piracy
Terrorism prevention
Wildlife and forest crime
Research
Data & Indicators
eLearning
Evaluation
Laboratory and forensic science services
Legal tools
Treaties

Within each of these arenas of work, there are many opportunities for the application of AI as listed in the topics being considered in this Symposium.

Online References

UN Data
http://data.un.org

United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
http://www.undp.org

United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
http://www.unodc.org

UN Charter