

Harnessing the power of Artificial Intelligence for Philanthropy: A call for action

Joost Mönks and Giuseppe Ugazio*

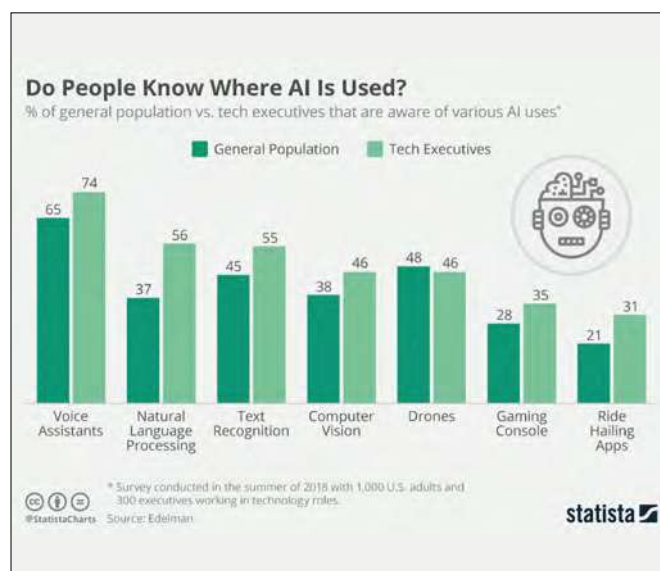
As AI is bound to transform the philanthropic sector what urgent issues need to be addressed to ensure its ethical and impactful use?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) broadly consists in making machines do things that would require intelligence if done by humans. AI is increasingly ubiquitous in our lives, we use it on a daily basis when searching Google, listening to music online or buying train tickets. Even if most of us are not really aware, AI's skills have reached sophisticated levels in a variety of domains including its ability to read, translate, recognise faces and objects, move autonomous vehicles or track a person's emotion.

Surprisingly this technological revolution has received only little attention from philanthropic organisations (PO) so far. AI will have a deep impact on philanthropy, from revolutionising online fundraising, redefining the way we measure impact, to predicting the results of climate action, to name a few. Along with these benefits, AI also raises fundamental questions around the ethical and inclusive use of AI and the way it influences society.

“AI will have a deep impact on philanthropy, from revolutionizing online fundraising, to redefining the way we measure impact, and to predicting the results of climate action.”

Importantly, it is not a matter of “if”, but of “when” and “how” PO will adopt AI as the sector will undoubtedly move towards its widespread use. To do so in an informed and conscientious way, Prof. G. Ugazio, holder of the Edmond de Rothschild Foundations Chair in Behavioural Philanthropy at the GFRI and Dr. J. Mönks, lecturer on emerging philanthropy at the University of Geneva, are convinced it requires urgently addressing a number of key issues including: Unveiling the nuts and bolts of AI most suitable to assist PO; Understanding the practical use AI in PO and grasping quickly-evolving behaviour in the digital age; and defining principles for the ethical, inclusive and human centred use of AI.



Understanding the nuts and bolts of AI

AI is frequently not well understood in terms of how it works and what it can offer to the sector, but also what limitations it faces beyond the hype around AI. To achieve this, the philanthropic sector needs to develop a practical and realistic understanding of the basic mechanics and relevance of AI, for instance, regarding its ability to analyse large volumes of data and the use of algorithms to develop new insights, identify patterns, make predictions and recommendation and the tools it offers to allow automatization of tasks in reporting and administration.

Defining practical use of AI and evolving behaviour

AI finds increasing use and application in the core processes of PO and in project interventions. This includes for instance to use of AI to analyse, inform, and predict donor behaviour such as in Donor Matching applications, personalized Online Fundraising Campaigns – including ‘precision philanthropy’, and applications using big data to uncover patterns. Another approach from which POs can learn and benefit is applying AI4Good to promote technological solutions to societal challenges, with a growing number of applications in the development and humanitarian sectors. This more established field, with its annual “AI for Good Summit” hosted by ITU in Geneva, comprises, for instance, predictive AI for to enable efficient rapid response, or using AI to forecast the spread of COVID-19.

Ethical standards for the use AI

Finally, current advances in AI applications have yielded far-reaching concerns on the ethical limits for its use. Questions about human values, privacy, accountability, among others have been at the core of current ethics guidelines and recommendations released in recent years by organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO and the UN Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation. However, despite an apparent agreement that AI should be “ethical”, there is debate about what constitutes ‘ethical AI’ and which requirements, technical standards and best practices are needed for its realization. Surprisingly the philanthropic sector has been largely absent from these debates despite its unique position to bring neutral yet informed opinions from the private sector to advance the definition and implementation of contextualized ethical guidelines.

Focusing on these priorities, Prof. Ugazio and Dr. Mönks propose to develop a research and educational agenda to prepare and engage PO to embrace AI and participate in shaping our digital futures. Concretely, this agenda will entail events focused on raising awareness and building capacity; the initiation of a “Geneva Dialogue on Philanthropy and AI” series to stimulate discussion and collaboration between academia, public entities and the private sector; and, lastly, it will develop case studies and interdisciplinary research uncovering key applications of AI for PO, for instance in impact assessment or analysis of donor behaviour.

Geneva with its leading research institutions and its international community offers a fertile ecosystem to launch the initiative and engage dialogue and collaboration between the various stakeholders to harness the power of AI for the philanthropic sector and contribute to the advancement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We invite you to contact us should you wish to collaborate and/or learn more. ▶



Prof. Giuseppe Ugazio



Dr. Joost Mönks

* Dr. Joost Mönks is Lecturer at the University of Geneva and Prof. Giuseppe Ugazio is the holder of the Edmond de Rothschild Chair in Behavioral Philanthropy at the same institution. They can be reached at joost.moenks@unige.ch and giuseppe.ugazio@unige.ch.