

UT begins research on ethics of AI

The University of Texas at Austin is researching how to use artificial intelligence ethically and responsibly through funding AI-related research projects over an eight-year timeline. Hosted by the Media Ethics Initiative, the “Designing Ethical AI Technologies” event introduced the Good Systems Grand Challenge project.

Ken Fleischmann, the inaugural chair of Good Systems, spoke Sept. 24 to a room of students and professors about how UT is approaching this challenge, why it’s an important conversation and the different research topics teams are undertaking.

“Those who develop AI don’t always fully consider the ethical and societal implications of their technologies,” said Fleischmann, associate professor in UT’s School of Information. “It is really critical AI developers think critically (about their technologies).”

The main goals of Good Systems are to design technologies that benefit society and to protect society from harmful AI, according to their website. Good Systems will impact professionals, such as lawyers, policymakers and medical professionals, as well as people in their everyday lives, Fleischmann said. The project will address the sometimes forgotten “should we” questions that arise when technological advances are made.

“On (the) society side, folks like lawyers and policymakers may not fully understand AI’s role in society,” Fleischmann said. “In many cases, we may not even be aware of when or how AI is being deployed.”

At least 24 departments are involved in this research and are working on a wide range of AI-related research projects funded by the Good Systems challenge. Ten projects have been awarded a total of \$1 million for the upcoming fiscal year, Fleischmann said.

“Right now, we are focused on conducting basic research, creating educational materials and engaging the campus community,” Fleischmann said. “This is the first four years of our eight-year mission. It constitutes phase one. Phase two is a bit in the future, that’s our second four-year phase ... but loosely what we are planning to do is to engage with industry around research, outreach to the public and government, and think about how we need to reconfigure the academy to address society’s ethical needs.”

AI is becoming a bigger part of everyday life for convenience factors. It is also becoming a standard in certain industries.

“The conversation about ethical AI is important because we are becoming more and more reliant on ‘smart’ machines and algorithms,” said Scott Stroud, event coordinator and director of the Media Ethics Initiative. “As these technologies are integrated more with our daily lives, we must reflect more on what they are doing to us and how they are

forming us. In exploring (these questions), we can discover new aspects to important ethical concepts such as respect, virtue and what it means to do the right thing.”

Without proper precautions, AI has the potential to learn the behaviors and opinions of anyone interacting with it, Fleischmann said. The Tay chatbot, a Microsoft Twitter bot, is an example of what happens when AI is unregulated. The bot quickly began mimicking sexist, racist and xenophobic beliefs.

“There are lots of amazing things going on with technology, but there are also some lowlights,” Fleischmann said. “This Microsoft chatbot was originally intended to learn from Twitters users ... (but it) became trained in very horrific ways. ... They had to pull the plug after 16 hours. ... I truly believe that the folks who designed Tay were very genuine in their intent and were hoping for the best. They unfortunately ended up with the worst.”

UT is hoping to provide research-based guidelines to help prevent another Tay bot case. Good Systems is UT’s third and last grand challenge initiative. The Grand Challenges are projects that require an interdisciplinary approach and research difficult problems society faces. Previous Grand Challenges include “Whole Communities–Whole Health,” an initiative focused on child health concerns, and “Planet Texas 2050,” a campaign focused on protecting our resources.

“Collaboration is important because so many at UT and in Moody College work on related topics but don’t often hear about each other’s research,” Stroud said. “We can always grow as researchers, thinkers and citizens from hearing passionate and driven scholars talk about their work.”

Miah Ornelas, an attendee and communication and sciences disorders sophomore, believes these kinds of conversations are important for students to pay attention to.

“It is important that students attend these events because when you are in college, you are kind of stuck in your own little bubble and working on what you need to work on,” Ornelas said. “But attending these events kind of opens your perspective on other things that are happening on the university and in the real world.”