

Front-running legislatures can foster AI that empowers users of digital technologies

Dr. Kristina Irion, Assistant Professor at the Institute for Information Law (IViR) at the University of Amsterdam

Kristina Irion is an assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam's Institute for Information Law. As a lawyer with a strong edge on technology and policy making, Kristina has shifted into studying the transnational digital technologies of an increasingly interconnected world.

Kristina believes that human rights are now under an enormous pressure from territorially indistinct technologies, which our existing regulatory structures are often unfit to hold accountable. She has a special interest in the protection of personal data, especially when the flow of data across borders calls for its continuous protection. Much of Kristina's current work has consisted of combining her expertise of the personal data protection fields with that of transnational digital technologies. In the global digital context, there are many other human rights exposed, including those concerning non-discrimination, personal autonomy, and other individual freedoms.

Fortunately, the European Union and European countries have begun to better understand their geopolitical position in the world; and these authorities are intent on preserving human rights as modern technologies become more pervasive in everyday life. There is now a better recognition of European values which helps to correct the narrative that less regulation of digital technology is the key to actually compete with technology titans of the world. Irion firmly believes that Europe should preserve its values in the next decade—specifically about protecting its human rights and democratic fabric in this highly connected global space.

Without protections built-in, a globally interconnected civilization could result in what Irion calls “the digital dark ages.” While social media enables freedom of expression and spaces for discourse, it has also created a host of new, potentially dangerous problems. From the rise of the anti-vaccine movement, conspiracies, and even manipulation of electoral processes, social media has transformed the discourse and ideologies of those who use it.

Kristina, however, believes the European Union is on track in being more assertive about its policy ambitions. With many more initiatives already rolling, Europe's adaptations to a global pandemic have prioritized user rights with their greater dependence on digital communications. But ideally, policymakers listen more to Europeans in order to gauge user needs in digital spaces. In fact, Irion believes we should move away from treating social technologies as purely private businesses, and instead consider them as social utilities that have a profound impact on the lives of Europeans. However, in current digital ecosystems, the existing regulatory formations simply aren't adapting quickly enough.

Kristina’s expertise provides particularly valuable foresight to transforming digital spaces, as her research about the impact of cross-border digital trade on data privacy and accountable digital technologies helps to catalyse policy changes. Of course, this kind of vital research is difficult to fund independently. Academics, especially, are constantly hunting for grants that are hard to come by. Money in the industry is often poured into the pursuit of specific agendas. Irion is hopeful that, one day, even a fraction of lobbying budgets of large companies might be redistributed to those invested in public interest research.

In all of her work, Kristina’s mission remains bringing users on par with those who control digital technologies. Currently, much of the labour of maintaining control over one’s own personal data falls on the user. Whether it means micromanaging privacy settings or clicking away cookie banners, this rather large burden is one that she finds to be grossly unfair. She states that “our cognitive abilities are limited, and we cannot waste our lifetime crusading against our own technology.”

Ultimately, the European Union’s intellectual capacities, innovative power, and financial resources should be employed to develop what Kristina calls “a Guardian AI” – one that is free from the powers of higher authorities and commercial interests. This application should allow individuals to connect with one another and serve as a sovereign technology to all Europeans. To prevent crowding out by ever-evolving technology, laws should mandate that social media services, personal digital assistants, and smart home applications create interfaces to interoperate with the Guardian AI that monitors data protection, manages preferences but also keeps tabs on the fairness of algorithms. A vision like this will take the creation and support of an empowering technology that works on behalf of the users; and Kristina hopes to see it within the next five to ten years.

Lastly, Kristina advises that we should begin treating our devices as personal space worthy of the same protection as our homes. Leading by example, the European Union’s initiatives to integrate its values with digital technology is something that can benefit the rights of peoples elsewhere. While she believes that, in our modern age, not everything can be done with law, serious tools that empower users and embody societal values can help to get the job done.