The citizens of the future

Legal rights of robots

Good morning, everyone! We are Mihaela, Rodica, Moni and Petrică and we have a question for you: how many of you have ever flicked your printer or laptop a little bit too hard for having acted up? Do you ever throw your phone on your bed when it gets unresponsive – please raise your hands. I have some bad news for you. Maybe not now, but you might get sued in the future for violent offenses against your machines. It seems futuristic, doesn't it? Well, we are going to see today, during our presentation, how realistic it truly is.

We have divided our project in three parts: firstly, we'll fill you on today's blooming field of AI – can we really bank on robots? From there, we'll present ~~you~~ some of the ethical bits that form the laws of AI behaviour and, finally, we'll conclude by talking about the other side of the coin – if we impose obligations to robots, should we also offer them rights?

I'm sure you all recognize her. In October 2017, Sophia became the first robot to receive citizenship of any country and, in November 2017, she was named the United Nations Development Programme's first ever Innovation Champion, being the first non-human to be given any United Nations title. Impressive, isn't it? But I'm sure you'll be more impressed to find out that Sophie was able to obtain a credit card before any of you did, right in our country! However, all of these achievements have also sparked great controversies. Some wondered if Sophia could now vote or marry, or whether a deliberate system shutdown could be considered murder. Social media users used Sophia's citizenship to criticize Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

In the next 10 years, the development of artificial intelligence is predicted to lead to an increased replacement of humans from their jobs. But can we actually trust robots? Is the human race doomed to be enslaved by machines or will we be able to constraint them with laws?

The Three Laws of Robotics are a set of rules devised by the science fiction author Isaac Asimov, introduced in his 1950 collection I, Robot). The Three Laws, quoted as being from the "Handbook of Robotics, 56th Edition, 2058 A.D.", are:

1. First Law: A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm

2. Second Law: A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

3. Third Law: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

In later fiction, Asimov also added a zeroth law, to precede the others:

0. A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.

In 2011, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain jointly published a set of five ethical "principles for designers, builders and users of robots" in the real world, along with seven "high-level messages" intended to be conveyed, based on a September 2010 research workshop:

- Robots should not be designed solely or primarily to kill or harm humans.
- Humans, not robots, are responsible agents. Robots are tools designed to achieve human goals.
- Robots should be designed in ways that assure their safety and security.
- Robots are artefacts; they should not be designed to exploit vulnerable users by evoking an emotional response or dependency. It should always be possible to tell a robot from a human.
- It should always be possible to find out who is legally responsible for a robot.

We haven't, however, succeeded in creating a smart enough AI to implement these laws. Understanding the concept of "harm" and, more importantly, getting to differentiate situations based on the danger that they imply is something that researchers are struggling to translate into bytes. The AI is not even close to being autonomous and these laws are not needed anyways – for now... But who knows what the future holds?

Humans already have shown hatred toward robots, often kicking robot police resources over or knocking down delivery bots in hopes of reclaiming a feeling of security or superiority. Incidents of violence against machines are nothing new. Man has been at odds with machines for many decades. We kick the car when it does not operate, shove the vending machine when it does not dispense, and bang at the sides of the printer when it does not produce a copy. What is new is that it will only be a matter of time before the automated creatures will "feel" this hostility and/or feel the need to retaliate. And if we grant robots rights as quasi-citizens, will they be charged with assault and battery and legally responsible for the harm they may cause under criminal or civil law? Or should a robot's programmer be held jointly responsible?

What legal standing should the robot in the cubicle next to you have from a labour, employment, civil rights or criminal law perspective, and as a citizen? There are still far more questions than answers. In any case, the next time that Coke machine steals your quarter, better think twice before you kick it. Someday you may need a favour.

The European Parliament passed a resolution last year that envisions a special legal status of "electronic persons" for the most sophisticated autonomous robots. The proposal is being considered by the European Commission, Europe's top regulator.

Dr. David Hanson, the creator of Sophia, claims that advances with artificial intelligence will mean computers will be able to match the general intelligence of a one-year-old human by 2029,

and will require the same rights as humans by 2045. This is the same year that noted futurist Ray Kurzweil predicts that the technological singularity will take place – the point in time when artificial intelligence will surpass that of human intelligence.

For very lonely people, humanlike robots that don't age and can work nonstop could become highly desirable as marriage partners. In the far distant future, there may be a day when vociferous robo-lobbyists pressure Congress to fund more public memory banks, more national network microprocessors, more electronic repair centres, and other silicon-barrel projects. The machines may have enough votes to even run for public office themselves. One wonders which political party or social class the "robot bloc" will occupy. All in all, a more realistic and desirable scenario is one in which AI and automation are neither competitors nor substitutes to humans, but tools that we can engage effectively in order to make a better world. Just as Stephen Hawking said, "AI is likely to be either the best or worst thing to happen to humanity" and we should pay extreme attention to how we regulate its development.