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The "AI strategy" of the European Commission

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14-18 minutes

On February 19th the European Commission released their so-called "AI Strategy" under the title of "[A European approach to excellence and trust](#)". This document – that new President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced basically with her candidacy – is supposed to sketch out what the "AI" strategy of the European Union could or maybe should look like. It's not a direct policy paper though: Everything stays very vague and abstract. But future legislation and policy decisions will reference this document so I thought it might make sense to have a quick look at it.

As I already mentioned we will not be able to derive actual policy from it and we'll also not be able to confirm what is not part of the EU strategy but there are still a few interesting, a few revealing and a few somewhat concerning points to be harvested from the 26 pages. 26 pages that – if we are honest – could be cut down to 10 pages tops. But that short a strategy probably felt a little light to the Commission.

The state of “AI”

The global “AI” landscape is – as most of you will know – mostly a duopoly of US companies and Universities (a distinction that keeps getting harder to make with research entities and companies sharing not only projects but actual personnel) and Chinese companies and Universities. Both governments are also very into using the commercial products and research results that entities in their domain come up with but they are often more users than players themselves (aside from giving money of course).

As much as it feels like it should matter Europe really isn't part of the game. There are obviously research groups or some companies that are working in that space that might have limited visibility but on a global scale Europe is very much second tier at best. The main reasons for this are that Europe still doesn't have the amount of top tier companies doing “AI” research (and if something kinda interesting comes up, it gets bought by one of the big four (Alphabet/Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple)) and doesn't have the research funding that the US and China have. Beijing alone spends more on “AI” research than the German government for example. And “AI” research is a numbers game.

What is commonly called “AI” these days is a set of technologies that make bruteforcing statistics slightly less expensive. You want to be able to throw as much data at an “AI” system as you can come up with while spending as little on graphics cards and specialized circuits as possible.

And there have been impressive engineering feats allowing people to process impressive amounts of data in digital meatgrinders to create statistics burger patties. It's all quite clever really. But it's still about who has more resources. "Brilliant" "gamechanging" ideas are not on the horizon.

The EU strategy is fully within that understanding of "AI". While it at one point talks about new methods or a combination of symbolic and machine learning based "AI"s it really doesn't go anywhere with that realization. The later parts just talk about the relevance of training data and such. *The EU Commission is basically on board the hype train.* TOOT TOOT.

The EU Strategy: "Values" and the rest of the world

The EU wants to find its place within that duopoly because – that becomes very clear in the strategy paper – it believes in "AI" as the *absolute key strategic technology* for the next years. For the EU having successful "AI" ... something is more than just handing out the usual corporate subsidies but it's about securing Europe's access to this strategically relevant technology. Whether this belief is reasonable is another discussion but we will see it bleeding into a lot of what the paper argues for. The paper just never has the courage to actually put it into words: The EU believes it needs access to "AI" tech that doesn't depend on the competition (US and China).

Instead – and here we are starting out with the concerning

part – the paper keeps arguing that what is needed is “*AI based on European values*“. On page 3 for example, that paper argues that European data pools need to be created to enable “trustworthy AI, e.g. AI based on European values and rules”. The whole document is littered with these claims of European exceptionalism when it comes to “values” (without really going into what this means. And it keeps sounding more and more like the claim that US and China have no values or create systems that are untrustworthy by definition. This makes sense from a strategic position where trust is only possible in things under one’s control but within this paper it pretty clearly constructs the claim of European moral supremacy. An idea that falls apart when looking at Europe’s borders and how we decided to let thousands die because we didn’t like their religion, skin color or passport. Nice values you got there, are they more than just money?

We could set this aside as just PR talk but page 9 actually talks about striving to use “AI” to “export [Europe’s] values across the world”. European “AI” is supposed to be used for a new form of colonialism (which one can mostly see as a thread in the direction of the “Global South”). Some might argue that Europe has great values – the best! – things like Privacy or the Public Good or whatever but I keep wondering how Europe would react to a paper by the Chinese government arguing to use their technology to advance its values? But Europe sees itself as so exceptional that European “moral” hegemony is fine. Everybody will surely love it.

The whole talk about values tries to hide that aside from the idea of “exporting values” this is a tough as nails claim to use everything in the EU’s power to gain access to more “AI” and what it needs. “AI” as they are build today need data and lots of it. Data is the resource everything is based on. And the Commission knows this and has some fighting words on pages 8 and 9: “The Commission will closely *monitor the policies of third countries that limit data flows and will address undue restrictions in bilateral trade negotiations* and through action in the context of the World Trade Organization.” (emphasis mine) The EU will use all its economic levers to keep or gain access to data all over the world. I wonder if the EU would consider a GDPR equivalent somewhere else an “undue restriction”? We don’t know yet.

The EU does have strategic goals with its tech programs and that’s fine, that’s global politics. But hiding one’s goals behind talk about “values” and how others don’t have them just feeds into xenophobic and chauvinist ideas. And it makes the agenda of the European Commission unavailable for political debate. What if the Europeans don’t want to use their economic power to stripmine other countries for their data? This is a political debate that the Commission hides from.

The EU Strategy: Who’s it for

The EU doesn’t have any big players in the aspects people often associate with bleeding edge “AI”: No big self-driving

car manufacturers, nothing in the space of social software or virtual assistants etc. So how does the EU think they can make an impact? By playing to their established abilities.

The whole strategy keeps talking about domains that EU companies are successful in: Industry and agriculture as well as medical hardware and a few other niches. Playing to one's strengths and building on them makes a lot more sense than claiming to be able to just overtake other research and products that has been leading the markets for years. But especially when combining it with the strange "values" spin, this paper feels somewhat ...

underdelivering? Yes, the EU wants to do subsidies and support for successful European companies, but framing this as "the big AI strategy" promises a lot more than it delivers.

But there are a few problematic ideas mixed up in that push for more industries building or using "AI" tech: Page 8 begins with a curious statement about public administrations etc. Quote: "It is essential that public administrations, hospitals, utility and transport services, financial supervisors and other areas of public interest *rapidly begin to deploy products and services that rely on AI* in their activities." (emphasis mine)

The EU wants public services to serve as testbeds for EU "AI" stuff and therefore basically wants to force them into deploying "AI" based solutions. This paragraph doesn't talk about evaluating them or finding ways to use them to improve service quality: It's just about deploying "AI". No

matter what. One could assume that the Commission believes that “using AI” always creates better services, but that belief is ill-informed. “AI” systems can provide value just as they create new problems. And developing and deploying them is – just as any new technology – error-prone and costly.

The EU Strategy: The problematic parts

The strategy has a few bigger problematic parts that I want to summarize here. This kinda is the miscellaneous section with things that are just somewhat less well thought out or just curious.

The idea of “security” keeps popping up with the police etc. being pushed towards more “AI”. Given what we know about existing predictive policing and facial recognition solutions this should concern all of us deeply. But nothing concrete is talked about. On page 9 the paper even states that “AI can help protect citizens’ security and enable them to enjoy their fundamental rights” which has either no meaning or a very strange one. Yes under some condition any technology can help people be safe but how exactly does that apply to “AI”? In connection with the EU push for force public entities to deploy “AI” systems we will probably see a lot of deeply problematic systems going live the security domain. Someone really hasn’t done their homework or – GASP – all the talk about values and human rights was just “valuewashing”.

The paper was written under a German presidency so of

course some German ideas had to be put in there. Germany recently commissioned a report by a “data ethics commission” (DEK) which [wasn't all that good](#) (link in German). The DEK came up with a “5 level risk assessment” ... thing where the “evil algorithms” (level 5) should be forbidden and others would need to be certified in some way. While a stronger governance and regulation on what kind of automation is allowed to be deployed on real people I feel like the idea of these systems being easily categorizeable somewhat quaint: Many systems that are considered problematic today are not problematic because of their “algorithms” but by how their interface with other technical, social or economic systems. I don't trust that certifications will work in that area. Not just in general but also because of practical reasons: Where exactly are European public institutions getting all these experts who can make these certifications from? Germany can't hire IT people for their ministries and their internal projects because of how little government jobs pay in comparison to the private market. In the end we'll have people writing these certifications who can't reasonably assess what the systems do. Not a big fan to be honest.

The EU realizes that nobody within the EU builds processors and sees that as a problem but just because Europe is a “global leader in low-power electronics” I don't really see how that should spawn the production of specialized “AI”-processor production. There are some research programs but building a processor isn't easy and it isn't cheap. Especially considering how big everyone else's

lead is. The EU Commission is writing promises here it can never deliver on.

The EU Strategy: A stupid and a dangerous

The EU strategy also has two especially wrong ideas in it that I keep seeing and that deserve a special mention.

The stupid idea is Quantum Computing. Now Quantum computing does exist and there is research and for *very specific problems* these quantum systems might be extremely performant. The EU paper just says that “quantum computing will generate exponential increases in processing capacity”. Sources fucking needed, my friend.

There is a reference to some research programs in the quantum computing space but the idea that this will be applied to real world problems in the closer future is unrealistic. And why exactly this should help “AI” is also left completely blank. That part is just stupid.

The dangerous idea isn't specific to the EU. The paper argues that “AI” will help save the climate, and here we are deep in the danger zone. The climate crisis is not a problem to engineer our way out of: It will require massive changes to our way of life and our economies. To use a simile: Replacing all cars with electric Tesla cars will not save us or the climate. But we keep reading this idea everywhere. Because it's convenient: It will create jobs and wealth and growth and we can keep doing everything the same way we've been doing it for years. Seeing the EU Commission fall for that train of thought is dangerous not because they

might throw some money at “green startups” (don’t get me started on those, they are the literal worst, I’ve been in their pitches) but because they will throw money at them *instead of doing the required* changes.

That “AI” in the understanding I described earlier is seen as the magic tech to save the planet is extra ridiculous:

Training a language model creates as much CO2 as over 100 flights from Beijing to New York. These systems are brute force and all we know to do to make them better is to throw more data and more energy at them. This is basically a Bitcoin situation where you keep burning through energy for dubious results. Because “AI” systems today can only handle what they know, what they have seen. So they can optimize the systems we have a little. But tweaks don’t save us. Actual structural change does.

Summary

In the end the “AI” strategy is less than people were expecting. Some subsidies and research grants for existing EU companies to do “more AI” somehow. A lot of talk about “values” that is never substantiated and that is undercut or contradicted by a lot of what the document otherwise argues for. The strategy reads a little bit like something written by someone who has missed a hype and feels they need to go all in to catch up. Get your tulips now when they are still fresh!

But in all those pages the Commission says very little of substance. The substance is in the margins. The idea of

using one's tech and economic power as a crowbar to open up or keep open access to other regions' data as well as the shaming of every "AI" developed outside of the EU as untrustworthy and without "values" is a lot more aggressive as we are used to by the EU. But the authors are afraid of their own ideas and hide them behind "value speak". A way to avoid a political conversation about whether unelected officials should make these kinds of destructive decisions.

So, as far as "AI strategies" go, I'd give it a 2 out of 5.

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