Risks and Opportunities of AI for Children: A Common Commitment for Safeguarding Children

High level meeting co-organized by Pontifical Academy of Sciences, World Childhood Foundation and Institute of Anthropology (IADC) of the Pontifical Gregorian University

The Impact of AI on the Safety and Dignity of Children

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is profoundly transforming the digital experiences of children, presenting both opportunities and risks. The surge in AI innovation brings hope for solving complex problems, enhancing children's digital safety and dignity. However, the rapid development of AI, exacerbated by the pandemic-induced surge in digital usage, has also exposed children to increased online risks such as deepfakes, cyberbullying and sexual exploitation. While AI tools for analysis and management of text, images and big data can improve online safety, they raise concerns about misuse, privacy and algorithmic biases. Ensuring intentional and ethical AI deployment is crucial to safeguarding children's well-being in this evolving digital landscape.

With the rapid dissemination of AI technologies, it also introduces substantial risks to the safety and dignity of children. AI can be misused to sexually abuse and exploit children by generating and distributing child sexual abuse material, grooming children online, and ease the facilitation of human trafficking. The deployment of AI in surveillance and monitoring can have unintended consequences. While intended to enhance safety, excessive monitoring can infringe on children's right to privacy, leading to a culture of surveillance that undermines their sense of autonomy and dignity. Additionally, biased AI algorithms can perpetuate and even exacerbate existing inequalities.

Despite this, AI has the potential to significantly enhance the safety of children in the digital world. One of the foremost opportunities lies in AI's ability to detect and prevent online threats in real-time. Advanced AI algorithms can monitor digital environments for patterns of behavior, identifying potentially harmful interactions, and remove inappropriate or illegal material. In the Global South, where resources for traditional education and child protection services may be limited, AI offers the potential for innovative solutions to increase the reach and quality of services, incl education.

The development and use of AI in the digital world hold considerable promise for enhancing the safety and dignity of children. However, it is imperative to address the associated risks through robust regulatory frameworks, ethical AI development practices, and ongoing dialogue among stakeholders. Ensuring that AI technologies are designed and implemented with children's best interests in mind is crucial to harnessing their benefits while mitigating potential harms. As AI continues to evolve, a balanced approach that prioritizes both safety and dignity will be essential in safeguarding the well-being of children in the digital age.

Rationale and purpose

This high-level meeting aims to bring together representatives from the tech industry, faith-based institutions, academia, civil society, children and young people, and survivors of abuse to address the urgent issue of safe and ethical use of AI for children's wellbeing. This meeting will emphasize the shared responsibility of all stakeholders to act collaboratively and effectively within their areas of influence to protect children. The aim is to foster a shared understanding of the risks and opportunities presented by AI in enhancing child safety, and to outline the responsibilities of each stakeholder in acting within their sphere of influence in line with a joint commitment to protect children.

Expected Outcomes

1. **Shared Understanding:** Enhanced collective awareness of the current state of development of AI including risks and opportunities relating to the safety and dignity of children
2. **Defined Responsibilities:** Clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities of science, the tech industry, religious communities incl. the Catholic Church, researchers, civil society, children and young people, and survivors of abuse.
3. **Joint Commitment:** A oint statement that outlines specific, actionable steps each stakeholder may consider enhancing child wellbeing with AI and to combat child sexual abuse and exploitation using AI, including regular monitoring and evaluation of progress.