Racial Equality in the Context of Information Technology

Item 9: Inter-active dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

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Madame Rapporteur,

We thank you for highlighting this critical issue. Governments around the world increasingly rely on new digital technologies – including artificial intelligence, big data and machine learning systems – to inform everything from immigration and policing to the provision of social protection services.

Amnesty International has researched and documented numerous examples of the ways in which digital technologies contribute to continued inequality, and how the use of machine learning in “predictive policing” has led to the over-policing and over-surveillance of minority neighborhoods, creating a vicious feedback loop. Biased policing leads to greater targeting of minority groups, which means that these groups are over-represented in arrest data, which in turn leads policing algorithms based on this data to predict more crime in these neighborhoods.

In this context, police use of facial recognition systems is of particular concern. Research has consistently found that these systems process some faces more accurately than others, with higher rates of false positives for people of colour.


Further, where facial recognition technology is used for identification and mass surveillance, “solving” the accuracy rate problem does not address the impact of these technologies on both the rights to privacy and freedom of peaceful assembly and the right to privacy. For this reason, Amnesty calls on States to ban the use, as well as export, of facial recognition systems for mass surveillance by both state agencies and private sector actors.³

Finally, corporate use of these technologies can also exacerbate inequality. For instance, Google and Facebook's platforms are driven by advanced algorithmic systems trained on vast amounts of people's data. The dominance of these platforms means these technologies play a huge role in shaping our information environment with knock-on impacts on human rights, including equality and non-discrimination. As Amnesty International described in its 2019 report, this surveillance-based business model can fuel discrimination by both private entities and the platforms themselves, allowing the targeting and exclusion of groups based on protected categories such as ethnicity.⁴ In addition, algorithms designed to “maximize engagement” on the platforms have been shown to amplify and promote content including racism and advocacy of hatred.

Madame Rapporteur, as outlined in the Toronto Declaration,⁵ States and companies must prevent and mitigate the risk of racial discrimination in the design and use of digital technologies. There is an urgent need for States to introduce regulation to ensure transparency, accountability and oversight over digital technologies and AI systems, grounded in human rights.

Thank you.


⁵ https://www.torontodeclaration.org/