Bettina Berendt

KU Leuven

What does it mean to ask about "the human use of machine learning" - on positioning (not only) for engineers

One of the goals of this workshop is to ask a fundamental ethical question: "How do we reframe the notions of 'wrong' and 'good' in the context of machine learning and of data-driven technologies?" – and one of the most interesting features of such questions, certainly for computer scientists interested in clear answers, is that ethical questions often pose themselves as ethical dilemmas. In other words, from a scientific standpoint, there is no clear right and wrong in deciding what's right and wrong. Yet, by being human and acting in the world, we are forced to make commitments and in this way are forced out of that same standpoint.

In this talk, I will illustrate these general observations by drawing on an inventory of self-reflective questions for researchers carved out in collaborations with interdisciplinary teams consisting of privacy researchers and digital humanists, respectively. The collaborations involved data mining and major issues currently discussed with respect to it, in particular privacy, transparency and fairness/(non-)discrimination. Using concrete examples, I discuss the following issues: (1) Which actors are involved in formulating the (e.g. privacy) problem? (2) How does the researcher conceptualise the problem (e.g. privacy) in terms of the major legal and ethical positions currently being discussed? (3) Is informing users of (e.g. privacy) dangers always a good thing? (4) Do we want to influence users' attitudes and behaviours? (5) Who is the target audience? (6) What can we do in our various roles – as academics, teachers, intellectuals, etc.? We argue that asking these questions and positioning oneself with respect to them can help researchers to better comprehend their own perspective, that of others, and the influence of the solutions they are developing – and in closing also ask whether "that's all?".