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The Man and the Machine: When Systems Take Decisions Autonomously

Conference at University of Saint Gallen (HSG) in Switzerland, 26-27 June 2015, organized by Thomas Burri and Isabelle Wildhaber, profile area 'Law, Innovation, and Risk' at University of Saint Gallen.

Machines have been evolving rapidly. In all aspects of our lives we entrust them with ever more tasks. Machines manage production processes, steer cars into parking lots, land airplanes, execute transactions on stock exchange, propose options for insurance or holidays, and defuse or even drop bombs. Their responsibilities will probably continue to expand, since the evolution is driven by technological innovation and on a deeper level by the needs to lower costs, process big data, and save/sacrifice human lives. The inception of 'autonomy' seems inevitable.

This development raises new social, ethical, and legal questions. How far should we go in allowing machines to become independent? Are there general criteria? When, from a legal perspective, is a point reached where a machine decides fully autonomously? Is artificial intelligence necessary for this to happen? Is it a question of software only or can a machine's decisions be embedded in hardware? Is it necessary for the legal perspective to rely on the code, and thus in a way to adopt the view of technology, for instance in order to assign civil liability or criminal responsibility? How does a machine's ability to learn feed into this?

This call's main interest is in the ability of machines (computers, robots, programmes, etc.) to take decisions. It broadly understands both machines and decisions: think of war drones using deadly force; nanobots delivering medical substances within the human body; swarms of robots forming a specific shape; or helper robots navigating the sites of natural disasters on their own. All aspects of decisions taken in this kind of situation – be they legal, technical, social, etc. – are of interest for this call for papers.

The conference will take place at the University of Saint Gallen in Switzerland on 26-27 June 2015. Some keynote speakers will be invited. There is no publication commitment, but we are currently negotiating a special issue to which participants will be free to commit.

Thomas Burri and Isabelle Wildhaber

University of Saint Gallen in Switzerland is one of the leading social sciences universities in Europe. It offers a range of study programmes in business, economics, international affairs, and law. Most recently a Master in International Law has been added; all courses in this master are taught in English language.

Further information



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