

EU seeks AI champions: Five things to know

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From translation apps to facial recognition, artificial intelligence is becoming a major part of everyday life and the European Union is eager to bring order to this digital "wild west" where the US and China dominate.

On Wednesday, key Brussels officials will unveil ideas to regulate AI, hoping to stimulate EU champions in the highly strategic sector while also dispelling fears that a high tech Big Brother will stalk Europeans.

Here are five things to know about the EU's plans:

AI 'values'

Brussels officials acknowledge that European companies missed the boat on the first wave of the internet revolution, with Sweden's Spotify arguably the only well-known actor against Google, Facebook or Amazon.

Where Europe has taken leadership is on internet rules, with its landmark GDPR regulation lauded as a global standard on protecting personal data.

EU Industry Commissioner Thierry Breton, who is spearheading the bloc's strategy, wants to uphold the standard when it comes to AI.

"As with GDPR, we have our own rules and we will have them here," Breton said

"They will make sure that the individual and fundamental rights that we cherish in Europe are respected," he said.

Big Brother is watching

Facial recognition is one of the most evocative examples of [artificial intelligence](#), sparking dystopian nightmares of Big Brother tracking your every move.

Early reports that Brussels would demand a moratorium on its usage proved unfounded with EU stepping back for the simple reason that the technology is already widely deployed, officials said.

"What we will say in the paper in a very lawyered up language is, let's pause and figure out if there are any... circumstances where [facial recognition](#) remotely should be authorised," said EU Commission executive vice president Margrethe Vestager.

"Because if we do not pause, then it will... just be everywhere," she warned.

Risky business

Regulating AI "is a bit like the wild west. We begin on virgin land where you do what you want and after we get organised," said Breton.

The EU's attitude to artificial intelligence will be risk-based: the more dangerous or controversial the use, the tougher the rules.

This strategy is welcomed by businesses who feared Brussels would attempt to set blanket rules

for entire industries and stifle innovation.

Instead, the EU's AI strategy will look at activities case-by-case, with basic uses such as translation or maps left largely alone, but medical technology kept on a tighter leash.

Companies found in a regulation grey zone would be able to sign up to a voluntary EU certification for AI.

No 'cold war'

Top EU officials insist that the bloc's strategy is not intended as a declaration of war against the US and China, the current main players in deploying artificial intelligence.

The concern is made worse by talks of the world splitting into digital spheres of influence, with Europe caught between Washington and Beijing.

However, "in terms of responsibility or security, no matter the origin of these products, a certain number of rules will have to be accepted in order to operate in the EU," said the Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders.

Vestager said the plans were more about defining a European approach to AI than a desire to impose rules beyond Europe's borders.

Lobby frenzy

The announcement on Wednesday, expected at about 1130 GMT, is the first step in a long legislative process.

For the next three months, stakeholders will have their chance to influence the plans. The heads of Google and Facebook already made their views known during recent visits to EU headquarters.

"The discussion is truly open to all. The goal is not to say here you go, these are the rules," said commissioner Reynders, a former Belgian foreign minister.

"But there are some real limits in current regulation," he added.

The EU hopes to have a draft law in place by the end of the year that would then need to be approved by EU member states and ratified by EU parliament.

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