”I Understand My Role as a Translator”

Ning Wang researches the ethical and societal implications of new technologies. In doing so, she brings together different disciplines and stakeholders. In her view, complex challenges such as AI cannot be understood from a single perspective.

Author Eveline Rutz **Photos** Jonas Weibel



”Dealing with omplex challenges like AI requires a transdisciplinary approach.”

Ning Wang

or Ning Wang artificial intelligence is becoming part of her everyday life. She uses large language models (LLMs) both professionally and privately – often as a ”sparring partner.” When developing a new idea or concept, she tests it with them and seeks their input. ”Sometimes I am genuinely surprised by how creative the responses from AI applications turn out to be,” the researcher says. She enjoys this interaction and finds inspiration in it.

Ning Wang examines new technologies from an ethical and social perspective. She shows how innovations can be advanced and deployed responsibly. Since 2022 she has been working at the Digital Society Initiative (DSI) at the University of Zurich. She also advises international organizations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

AI helps her include different perspectives

”LLMs are trained on vast amounts of data from a wide range of fields,” says Ning Wang during a meeting with Abraxas. From a purely statistical standpoint, this allows them to generate content that is potentially more interesting than what a single human could produce. The fact that chatbots often respond in a rather flattering manner does not bother the ethicist. She appreciates that each response offers additional options. ”It draws my attention to aspects I might otherwise have overlooked.” However, Ning Wang does not use LLMs to address highly personal matters, such as medical questions.

Overall, she views new technologies positively. ”They can bring great benefits to society,” she says - povided that risks are minimized and ethical, social, legal, and regulatory challenges are addressed. Ning Wang points to the humanitarian use of drones, one of her research focus areas.

Drones can provide valuable services in crisis zones – for instance, by transporting medical supplies or capturing topographical imageries. Consequently, aid organizations began using them early on in Africa and Asia. ”Tech companies needed safety data to get their drones certified in the US and Europe,” says Ning Wang. Some collected this data in resource-poor regions where regulations were not yet in place, yet used the results primarily for their own benefit. Today the needs of local populations are given greater importance, the ethicist notes. She has developed guidelines and assessment tools to enable this.

Awareness of the impact of AI has increased

She adds that the significant impact of AI on society is now widely recognized. Society expects companies to operate sustainably. Measures for Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) have become established practice. (((”Ethics is now part of business models from a compliance perspective.”))) However, regulations such as the EU AI Act remain necessary, says Ning Wang, as they help minimize the negative effects of AI. Legal requirements are not inherently stifling innovation; the key is striking an optimal balance.

Tackling complex problems across disciplines

"Different stakeholders speak different languages," Ning Wang observes. Legislators, for example, are sometimes insufficiently familiar with the technical and ethical challenges involved. "That is where I can facilitate dialogue and act as a translator." As a research lead, she brings together the scientific community, the tech industry, government agencies, non-profits, and civil society. At the DSI, she established a collaborative platform entitled "The BRIDGE Lab: Bridging the Wisdom Gap," aiming to address the so-called "wisdom gap" – a term describing the difficulty of fully grasping complex challenges like AI when finding sulotions to tackle them. "No single discipline possesses the wisdom to handle this on its own," says Ning Wang, calling instead for transdisciplinary approaches.

"Other countries are making faster progress with AI. But with Apertus, Switzerland has now positioned itself wisely."

Ning Wang grew up in Beijing during the 1990s. She completed her studies, built a start-up, and changed direction after an accident. "I am very curious and always dreamed of exploring the world," she says. Unlike many of her compatriots, she did not go to an English-speaking country. She chose Europe – drawn by its history and cultural diversity. In 2007 Ning Wang moved to Sweden, where she began to engage with issues of global justice. After periods of study in the Netherlands and Norway, she arrived in Geneva in 2010 to work for the United Nations.

She lived in the French-speaking part of Switzerland for six years, spent a sabbatical year in Argentina, and then moved to the German-speaking part to pursue a doctorate. "I experienced culture shock," Ning Wang recounts. Authorities in Geneva handled administrative matters in a "very relaxed" way. In Zurich things are much more structured. For instance you get reminders when a permit needs renewing. "Everything here is very punctual, very reliable."

A visionary and strategically important initiative

The globetrotter is impressed with Switzerland's cultural diversity within a relatively small terrain. Communication works well despite the different languages, and social coexistence is harmonious. Everything is carefully planned and thought through. At the same time, innovations take time. Ning Wang notes that other countries are making faster progress in AI, though Switzerland has now positioned itself wisely with Apertus, a Swiss open-source AI language model "It has launched a visionary and strategically important initiative that will hopefully see widespread use and gain in significance."

There is a need to catch up on research into ethical questions surrounding AI. Unlike in the EU, the USA and China, there is little institutional funding for this in Switzerland. Meanwhile, securing financial support for interdisciplinary studies is difficult, as they do not align exclusively with the funding priorities of individual disciplines. "Some colleagues therefore think I'm wasting my time," says Ning Wang. However she does not orient herself around specific job titles or career milestones. Making a tangible impact matters more to her.

In her private life, the researcher is not particularly tech-savvy. Instead of chasing the latest gadgets, she prefers physical activity; she practices yoga, meditates, and dances the tango. She discovered dancing while in Argentina. "It was a special experience for me," says Ning Wang, who was raised in China in a disciplined and rational environment. Before that, she had lived mostly inside her head. "Today, I need movement and meditation to balance out my intellectual work."



Ethicist, Political Scientist

Ning Wang

Ning Wang researches at the University of Zurich on ethical, social, and regulatory impacts of new technologies like AI, robotics, neurotechnology, and space technology. She advises international actors from the government, industry, and NGO sectors. The ethicist is originally from China; she studied international relations in Beijing and founded a start-up. From 2007 onwards, she pursued her studies in Europe.

In 2010 Ning Wang moved to Switzerland, where she worked for the UN and subsequently completed her doctorate on the topic of "Value Sensitive Humanitarian Innovation." Since 2022 she has worked as a Research Group Leader at the Digital Society Initiative (DSI).