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Transparency International New Zealand

Algorithm Charter puts the focus on people

Transparency International New Zealand (TINZ) supports the work of Stats NZ to create an Algorithm Charter. This aims for a more consistent approach by Government agencies in their use of algorithms in “a fair, ethical and transparent way.”

This week TINZ provided a submission on this Charter.

“We strongly support the primary purpose of the charter - to put the right safeguards in place when algorithms are used so that data ethics are embedded in the work, and so that the people and communities being served by these tools are always front of mind,” says Julie Haggie, Chief Executive Officer of TINZ.

TINZ would like to see the Charter go further, through:

Including a commitment to cross agency engagement on matters such as algorithmic literacy, frameworks for algorithmic hygiene, governance frameworks, whistleblowing, peer bias assessments and public consultation.

Extending the scope of the charter beyond people, to include natural systems.

Including algorithm use or development by external organisations for any provision of public services or projects.

Including a commitment by government agencies to support the development of

industry standards in algorithm use.

The use of sophisticated data modelling puts a lot of power in the hands of a few. Background reports and international research shows the risks of using algorithms. These risks include unintended bias, persistent error, breaches of privacy and restriction of choice. It is critical that there are systems in place to monitor and review this use, to make sure it is fair, unbiased and transparent. Also, researchers, journalists and civil society groups have an important role to play in shedding light on the use of data, as has been evident overseas.

There are different levels of transparency. The general population may not find use in seeing raw anonymized data, and may not understand the associated algorithm itself. But they do need to have trust in the fair use of algorithms that particularly apply to them. Transparency International supports the use of a principle called the 'right to explanation'. Using this principle, organisations can show what the outcome would have been for an individual if they had had certain different attributes. This allows people to understand a decision and to challenge it if they think it is not fair.

TINZ also strongly supports the inclusion of digital literacy within a general framework of literacy. Students should be encouraged to understand what algorithms do and how they are used in both operations and analysis.

This Charter applies to government agencies, but the main use of algorithms is in the business sector, for example in recruitment, financial services, social media and the private health industry. TINZ calls on the business sector to show a similar commitment as that provided by government agencies, including developing and improving industry standards.

Background information for journalists

1. Media Contact

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2. About Transparency International

Transparency International is a global civil society coalition based in Berlin, leading the fight against corruption. It compiles a number of measures of different aspects of corruption including the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Global Corruption Barometer, and the Bribe Payers Index. Information on Transparency International can be found at www.transparency.org.

3. About the New Zealand chapter of Transparency International

The local chapter of Transparency International works to actively promote the highest levels of transparency, accountability, integrity and public participation in government and civil society in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. Find TINZ at www.transparency.org.nz.

Transparency International New Zealand has several projects designed to support greater integrity. These can be viewed in our [Annual Report](#), and include

- National Integrity System Assessment, a risk assessment of the pillars of democracy

- Development of a Financial Integrity Systems Assessment Tool, for use with the financial sector;

- Leaders Integrity forums for senior public leaders

- Submissions and advocacy

- Thought leadership through communications and events.

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