FROM KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS TO THE FUTURE OF AI – THE AI FORWARD FORUM
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We all know those great conversations between friends where you set the world to rights together. You were originally just talking about a book you read recently, and suddenly the conversation turns deep and philosophical. Maybe you are outside on a warm summer evening, gazing at the stars and discussing the universe. Or maybe you are sitting cozily at the kitchen table, with a good cup of hot chocolate on a cold Dutch evening, and you talk for hours about consciousness, the human brain, and the future of artificial intelligence.

This is how the collaboration started between PhD candidates Judita Rudokaitė and Julija Vaitonytė of Tilburg University. Both originally from Lithuania, they met in the Netherlands and bonded over their similar backgrounds and interests. Judita originally studied psychology, went on into neuroscience, but often missed a computational component to really dive deep into the available data. Now she works on the FAINT project, where she uses image analysis and machine learning to predict people's fear of needles and help them calm down using biofeedback. Julija studied psycholinguistics, but her additional interests in neuroscience and human-computer interaction led her to the VIBE project, where she works on the development of an Intelligent Virtual Agent. As she puts it: "It's a perfect project to learn about humanity, in a sense. By studying agents, I have probably learned more about humans than if I had just studied humans directly".

Judita's kitchen table served as the breeding ground for their discussions about the field of Artificial Intelligence. They agreed that there is a lot of hype around the subject, but that a lot of it is over-promised and under-delivered. "Additionally, there are a lot of open questions that we haven't even answered from the human side. We talk about autonomous cars making the best ethical decisions, but humans themselves disagree on what those are." says Judita, "There are over 70 different definitions of intelligence, so how do we define AI? We don't know if it's possible to put human intelligence in a machine, mainly because we still need to figure out what it actually is that we want to put into the machine". Julija adds: "It can be hard to unpack what is real and what is not real for the general audience. The newspaper headline says that an AI invented something new, that it is an inventor, but it actually just slightly improved an existing thing. It is so easy to anthropomorphize."

Inspired by their discussions, Julija and Judita participated in the Tilburg University Impact program to start an interdisciplinary community around the question of how truly intelligent systems can be developed– the AI Forward Forum. A place to talk about such fundamental questions from the perspective of the sciences, humanities and arts. Judita reiterates the necessity of these more interdisciplinary discussions, the attention for more complex, hard problems: "if we don't understand what we want machines to do, then it's very hard for machines to ever do it". Judita had some experience in event organizing while she was a student, and combined with Julija's interest in science communication, they decided to organize at least one event to serve as a starting point for wider discussion. One events became several, and now the AI Forward Forum has regular events with a variety of talks, and an active online forum.

"We just started, so it goes slowly, but it's growing" says Julija, "People have been very kind in general, we are grateful that all these inspiring people donate time voluntarily to do this". Judita adds:

"Right now the community is mainly computer scientists, neuroscientists, the usual suspects. But we also want to reach people from different fields. We also want fashion designers, anthropologists, artists..." What they ultimately would like to achieve goes a lot deeper than just talking. The AI Forward Forum is supposed to attract a wide range of people from diverse areas, not only academia, to build a diverse community and propose a roadmap of ideas that could aid developments in intelligent systems. As Julija remarks: "Many people assume technology is purely created by technologists, but AI is so important for the future that it will require a lot of expertise from different fields. Otherwise you'll only see a lot of similar ideas in AI. It is always more 'save' to do what others are doing and unsafe to go into the fringes, to do something really unique.". Another goal therefore is to find partners and funding to realize tangible ideas and projects that come out of the AI Forward Forum.

So how do two PhD candidates – generally busy enough with their own research – end up with so much drive for community building and societal outreach? "It's like any other idea" says Judita, "you invest not only your time but also your knowledge and your heart. You end up in unexpected places that you wouldn't have if you only focused on your research." Julija concurs: "We get energized when we work on multiple projects, and it always serves as inspiration for our own work."

Also looking for some inspiration? The next AI Forward Forum event is on September 23, with a talk by Professor Catherine Pelachaud on human computer interaction.

Julija and Judita also invite anyone who is interested in AI, regardless of field or background, to contact them if you want to think along and collaborate.

You can find more information on: https://aiforwardforum.com/