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NEURAL RIGHTS: THE EMERGING LEGAL FRONTIER IN BRAIN-COMPUTER INTERFACES

- Srishti Sinha [1]

INTRODUCTION

Technology is no longer confined to our hands, screens, or keyboards, it is beginning to touch our very thoughts. Brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) and neural devices now have the ability to read, interpret, and even influence human cognition and emotions. This raises profound legal questions. Most importantly: Do humans have legal rights over their neural data and mental privacy?

The answer is not straightforward. Traditional laws were designed to protect speech, personal information, and physical actions, but they rarely account for the privacy of thoughts. Neural rights, an emerging concept in law, aim to fill this gap. Countries like Chile have already taken steps by amending their constitutions and criminal codes to protect mental privacy, highlighting the need for legal systems worldwide to recognize the sanctity of the human mind.

NEURAL DATA AND BCIS

Brain-computer interfaces are devices that create a direct link between the human brain and computers. They can:

1. Read neural activity – detecting thoughts, intentions, or emotions.
2. Stimulate brain functions – potentially influencing mood, perception, or decision-making.
3. Store neural patterns – allowing researchers or companies to analyze, predict, or even manipulate behavior.

Unlike ordinary personal data, neural data is deeply intimate. Misuse could lead to mental manipulation, identity theft, or discrimination based on thoughts, raising ethical and legal dilemmas that current law is ill-equipped to handle.

[1] 4th Year Student at School of Law, University of Mumbai, Thane sub-campus.

LEGAL CHALLENGES POSED BY NEURAL TECHNOLOGIES

Current laws face multiple challenges in regulating neural technologies:

1. Data Protection Gaps: Laws like GDPR or India's DPDP Act focus on information we voluntarily provide. Neural data, however, can be collected passively or involuntarily, creating a grey area.
2. Lack of Precedent: No jurisdiction has fully addressed scenarios where brain data is used as evidence, for employment decisions, or for marketing purposes.
3. Accountability Issues: If neural data is misused, it is unclear whether liability lies with the technology developer, the user, or even third parties who access the data.
4. Intersection with Human Rights: International law recognizes freedom of thought (Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), but neural technologies force us to reinterpret these rights in a digital and cognitive context.

WHAT ARE NEURAL RIGHTS?

Legal scholars and ethicists propose the concept of neural rights, which could include:

a. Right to Mental Privacy – No one can read, record, or extract your thoughts without consent.

b. Right to Cognitive Liberty – Protecting freedom of thought, belief, and decision-making from external interference.

c. Right to Mental Integrity – Preventing unauthorized stimulation that could alter moods, perceptions, or mental states.

d. Right to Neural Data Ownership – Giving individuals full control over their brain-generated data, including how it is stored, shared, or analyzed.

These rights extend beyond ordinary privacy or data protection laws, recognizing the brain as a fundamental realm requiring special legal protection.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS AND LEGAL PRECEDENTS

- Chile: In 2021, Chile amended its constitution to explicitly protect mental privacy and cognitive liberty. Its criminal code now criminalizes unauthorized access to brain data, making it the first country to recognize neural rights in law.
- European Union: The EU is considering treating neural data as a special category of sensitive personal data, requiring stricter consent and protection standards.
- Tech Companies: Corporations like Neuralink have released voluntary ethical guidelines, but these are not legally enforceable. Legal frameworks will eventually need to bind such companies to ensure protection of mental privacy.
- These examples indicate that neural rights are moving from theory to practice, but widespread adoption in law is still in its infancy.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS ACROSS FIELDS

The rise of BCIs and neural technologies could affect multiple areas of law:

1. Employment Law: Could employers monitor employees' neural data to assess performance or emotional states? Without clear legal protection, employees could be coerced into sharing thoughts involuntarily.
2. Criminal Law: Could law enforcement use neural data as evidence? How do courts weigh such evidence against fundamental rights?
3. Privacy Law: Consent for neural data is complex, can we truly give informed consent when a device can record subconscious or involuntary thoughts?
4. Human Rights Law: Recognizing neural rights as fundamental rights could place mental privacy alongside freedom of speech and bodily autonomy.

The lack of legal clarity creates both risks and opportunities for legislators, courts, and policymakers.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND THE NEED FOR REGULATION

Beyond legal concerns, neural technologies raise ethical questions:

- Should corporations be allowed to monetize brain data?
- How do we prevent neural discrimination in employment, insurance, or social services?
- What safeguards are necessary to prevent hacking or unauthorized manipulation of thoughts?

A regulatory framework combining law, ethics, and technology is essential to ensure neural innovations benefit society without compromising fundamental human rights.

CONCLUSION

Neural rights represent a new frontier in law, sitting at the intersection of technology, ethics, and human rights. As BCIs and neural devices become increasingly common, legal systems must evolve to protect the most intimate part of human existence, the mind itself. Policymakers, technologists, and legal scholars must work together to develop frameworks that:

- Protect mental privacy.
- Ensure cognitive liberty.
- Regulate the collection and use of neural data.

By recognizing and enforcing neural rights, society can embrace technological progress without sacrificing human dignity, autonomy, or freedom of thought. The law must ensure that while machines can interact with our minds, they never replace our control over them.

FURTHER READINGS

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