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## White House eyes regulations for artificial intelligence

By **TONY ROMM** | 09/08/16 05:02 AM EDT

The White House plans to release a policy roadmap for the fast-growing field of artificial intelligence this fall, laying out its vision for potential regulation of an industry that encompasses everything from smartphones that talk back to their owners to cars that drive themselves to supercomputers that sift through reams of data to predict the spread of disease.

The effort — with only months left in the Obama administration — comes as companies like Facebook and Alphabet, the parent company of Google, try to ensure government doesn't overreact to the technology by creating rules that will hinder its development.

The White House is expected to detail its initial thoughts on how tech companies can be more transparent with consumers on the inner workings of artificial intelligence, which relies on powerful computers to collect and analyze troves of personal data. It's also expected to address the economic impact of AI, including on jobs, as more companies use such systems to perform tasks traditionally done by people.

Ed Felten, the deputy U.S. chief technology officer, declined to identify the specific proposals the White House will make in its report. He did say the White House would couple its findings with a plan for how the government can supercharge its own efforts to harness AI, particularly by refocusing federal research spending on such projects.

"There's a broad belief among AI experts [that] there have been fundamental steps forward in the technology recently," Felten said in an interview. "There's also, I think, a realization among policymakers and the public that this technology may affect a lot of different areas of life."

A nebulous concept to many in the nation's capital, artificial intelligence — long the stuff of movies and fiction — spans some of Silicon Valley's most prized endeavors, including self-driving cars, which use complex algorithms to navigate traffic, and personal assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Echo, which can recognize their owners' questions and commands. Facebook has used deep learning, a kind of AI, to analyze billions of user posts and photos, and IBM's famed Watson supercomputer has been tapped for extensive cancer research. (It also appeared on Jeopardy.)

Even as the technology captures Silicon Valley's imagination, however, it's posing complex policy challenges. AI could displace workers in a range of industries, for example, and computers that collect and analyze consumer data raise questions about the privacy and security of the information.

With the technology at such an early stage of development, though, many tech giants are urging the Obama administration not to derail AI developments that might reshape health, education and other sectors. Facebook, in comments submitted this summer, said the "U.S. government should maintain a light-touch regulatory approach focused on consumers and outcomes over underlying technologies." It also called for "R&D incentives for firms building products and services with emerging technologies like AI."

Google, in its own comments, observed that governments must figure out "how to apply old rules and procedures when faced with new technical facts that break the mold." Writing on behalf of X, the technology lab that produced the company's self-driving car, public

policy manager Alex Kovak called for regulatory flexibility, along with more investment at key federal agencies to “better equip them to understand and manage the unique challenges associated with specific implementations of artificial intelligence.”

Sensing the scrutiny ahead, five of the industry’s biggest players — Amazon, Facebook, Alphabet, IBM and Microsoft — appear to be forming a group to look at how AI affects workers and consumers, with an eye toward forming a “self-policing organization” and avoiding the need for regulation, the New York Times reported last week. The companies each declined to comment on their work. Many tech firms already devote millions of dollars every year to lobbying on issues related to AI, including self-driving cars, drones and machine learning.

The tech industry’s “investments are driving an interest in the public policy issues, and interest in educating policymakers about AI ... ahead of any hard legislative proposals,” said Abigail Slater, vice president of legal and regulatory policy at the Internet Association.

Throughout Obama’s time in office, the White House has sought to steer the debate around some of the most pressing issues facing the tech sector, including online privacy and the field of “big data.” In May, the White House turned its attention to AI, announcing four workshops structured around the social benefits and regulatory challenges posed by the emerging technology.

*Li Zhou contributed to this report.*