

The Global AI Ethics Consortium

on

Ethics and the Use of Data and Artificial Intelligence in the Fight Against COVID-19 and other Pandemics

Statement of Purpose

April 15th, 2020

The COVID-19 crisis has already changed daily life in innumerable ways, and will continue to have a major impact as it shifts global opinion, politics, and approaches to combating pandemics and crises of all kinds. Among the many areas its effects are being felt is in the field of technology, and in particular society's attitudes toward the potential—and risks—of Data and Artificial Intelligence (AI) for tackling COVID-19.

[Numerous examples have been documented](#) so far regarding the use of data and AI-based technologies to combat the virus, the spread of the epidemic and its wider social and economic consequences. These examples illustrate the potential of data and AI to inform decisions and manage uncertainties across the trajectory of health pandemics, as well as to accelerate the identification of interventions and treatments that may halt the spread of COVID-19.

However, while many deployments of AI may remain experimental and limited—and that is by no means a given—it is essential that we begin now to consider the ethical ramifications involved. Innovative technologies that employ AI have the capacity to help save lives, including monitoring, tracking and anticipating the propagation of the virus. However, historically, health and other emergencies have led to urgent and rapid uses of technology, without much attention to the wider social, economic, cultural and political context. While this may be somewhat understandable, the danger is that short-term decisions made now, amid the urgency of a crisis, may lead to long-term habits, approaches and norms that are difficult to reverse. Trade-offs, therefore, need to be clearly recognized and discussed.

We fervently hope that this state of crisis does not last much longer. We also firmly believe that the time for analyzing how AI is deployed—whom it affects, how it affects them, what

are its broader social and economic impacts—is now. The areas and topics that need consideration include:

- Improved mechanisms for trusted data governance, including new ways to collect data or provide data access, in times of crisis;
- Ethical considerations surrounding the use of AI in medicine and public health, including developing medical treatments, modeling the epidemic and making decisions related to triage, prevention and care;
- Concerns related to AI-based privacy and surveillance measures employed in health crises (bio-surveillance);
- Fairness, efficacy and inclusion issues related to the use of AI and technology in healthcare settings and as part of the response to the pandemic (particularly for marginalized and vulnerable populations);
- Ethical and other limitations of current legislation as it applies to the use of AI-technologies and data gathering during times of crisis;
- Legal and ethical considerations in AI-based public preventative hygienic network systems;
- Ethical considerations and the use of AI in individual and collective mental care during the times of multilateral crisis;
- The role of AI in spreading false information and other harmful content, particularly on social media platforms;
- Opportunities—and limitations—in using AI to manage remote work and in preserving livelihoods during a time of social distancing, as well as equity considerations in the distribution and use of these technologies;
- Application of AI-based remote education and virtual/augmented reality teaching and learning systems as preventive measures against late wave pandemics, including equity issues in the availability and design of these technologies.

These are just some of the many issues likely to be highlighted by the current crisis, but the broader point is this: **Policymaking and the deployment of AI amid crisis must rest on a firm foundation of robust ethical standards, guidelines, and rules that apply both to the technology itself as well as to the information produced while using the technology (End-to-end data and AI ethics).** AI technologies and associated data usage are part of an overall effort to protect the health of humanity. As such, the dignity of every individual must be valued through recognizing responsible and ethical practice, now and in the medium term once the crisis is contained. It may not be sufficient, in times of crisis, to rely on citizen consent as an avenue for neutralizing ethical responsibility in the use of their personal data. The negative consequences of refusing consent (risking lives) may weigh heavily in the decision to approve data collection and usage.

We do recognize that standards and rules must not slow down or stifle innovation, a development that would result in missed opportunities to save lives and decrease social disruption. However, we believe that rapidly deploying new technologies, with insufficient

consideration to societal and ethical implications, risks unleashing a number of negative developments with much broader and longer-term effects. We need to create ethical frameworks that give users clear sets of rules and considerations, foster trust in data and technology, and maximize the potential of AI while limiting its harms. We recognize that there is much good work by medical experts, and will be sure to work closely with them, and other relevant experts.

Independent academic research will play a fundamental role in designing and implementing such frameworks. Academic expertise, drawn from across disciplines and geographies, is critical in helping guide governments, companies, NGOs and other actors navigate current uncertainty and arrive at sound and justifiable responses to current and future health crises. Consequently, we agree to form a **Global AI Ethics Consortium** with the intent of:

1. Supporting immediate needs for expertise related to the COVID-19 crisis and the emerging ethical questions related to the use of AI in managing the pandemic.
2. Creating a repository that includes avenues of communication for sharing and disseminating current research, new research opportunities, and past research findings.
3. Coordinating internal funding and research initiatives to allow for maximum opportunities to pursue vital research related to health crises and the ethical use of AI.
4. Attending (where possible) annual meetings of the proposed consortium to discuss research findings and opportunities for new areas of collaboration (the first suggested 2020 meeting to **precede/follow** the [Responsible AI Forum](#) in Munich).

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