



Reflections on AI

Q&A with
Stefaan Verhulst

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The TUM IEAI had the pleasure of speaking with Stefaan Verhulst, Co-Founder and Chief Research and Development Officer at The GovLab, New York University. We were able to ask him some brief questions about AI ethics, the role of international collaborative networks like the Global AI Ethics Consortium, and how artificial intelligence will affect human intelligence.

1. What is the biggest misconception about Artificial Intelligence?

The biggest misconception about AI is that it can be designed 100% in an objective way. Artificial Intelligence, like most other technologies, are in essence social technological artifacts. The context in which AI has been created determines the design, and as a result, it will never be 100% objective.

2. What is the most important question right now in AI ethics?

One of the most important questions with regard to AI ethics is the question of asymmetry, by which I mean, who has access to the data that can inform the algorithm and ultimately the output of AI. Who knows how the algorithm has been made? We don't only have data asymmetries, we have also information asymmetries. Who has the resources to actually run all these algorithms in order to generate insight? Data, information and resource asymmetries are strengthening power asymmetries and undermining

equity. One of the most important challenges and questions in AI ethics is who makes the decisions.

3. The IEAI and the GovLab are currently working on a free online AI ethics course. What is the need for such a course?

We are about to release the "Global AI Ethics Course" which focuses on global insights with regard to AI ethics. The need for the course is based upon the need to really learn from each other across the world. Too often discussions about AI ethics are narrow and focused, as if no one else had similar kind of discussions. What we hope to do with this course is to really provide comparative insights on what other countries, cultures, communities, regions, continents have learned from the last few years of experimenting with AI ethics and with AI governance. The course will focus on three big areas: 1. AI applications: their ethical impact and how different societies have responded to those impacts differently, 2. the issue of data and how it is organized in societies to actually support equitable and fair AI, and 3. different government structures that seek to make AI more ethical. In order to explore these three areas, we will have about eighteen faculty members that have agreed to share their wisdom and we hope everyone will join.

4. Who should be in charge or involved in developing ethical frameworks and standards for artificial intelligence?

As with most decisions in a democratic context, decisions with regard to regulation, policy and governance in general need to be developed in a legitimate manner. Legitimacy typically has four components: 1. it needs to be transparent (what are the decisions and how are these decisions made), 2. it needs to be accountable (how will those who are responsible in designing and making decisions be accountable down the line with regard to AI ethics), 3. it needs to be representative of those interest in society that will be affected by the design of the policies and then 4. it needs to be participatory and inclusive. Which is why we have also recommended that every society or every country or city should develop for this cause an AI assembly where there is a deliberation with citizens around AI and its ethical implications, given the fact that AI will become a major part of the decision-making moving forward.

5. What role can an initiative like the Global AI Ethics Consortium play in promoting ethical AI?

It is crucial to learn from each other and have an international group of experts, like the one that has been convened here, being asked to reflect on unique questions that might be unique in a particular kind of context. I think the group has a unique opportunity to go beyond a narrow and quite often very parochial way of looking at AI and AI ethics and (instead) make it broader and more sophisticated by taking comparative insights into account when reviewing applications or ethical challenges.

6. We often say that AI is changing or transforming the world. To what extent is AI changing us as humans?

I think the key element with AI is the "I" (Intelligence) and the key challenge here is

to reframe the question: to what extent will artificial intelligence affect human intelligence? There are a variety of ways to look into this. One is that it can obviously improve an augment human intelligence in a way that might be beneficial. However, it can also take away the agency, which is associated with human intelligence and then affect the human decision making in a negative way. AI will have a major impact on human intelligence, but what we need to be sensitive to, is how human intelligence is closely linked to human agency. We have to be extra vigilant.

Meet the expert



Stefaan G. Verhulst is Co-Founder and Chief Research and Development Officer of the Governance Laboratory (The GovLab) at New York University (NYU) - an action research center focused on improving governance using advances in science and technology - including data and collective intelligence.

He is also, among other positions and affiliations, the Editor-in-Chief of Data & Policy, an open access journal by Cambridge University Press; the research director of the MacArthur Research Network on Opening Governance; Chair of the Data for Children Collaborative with

Unicef; and a member of the High-Level Expert Group to the European Commission on Business-to-Government Data Sharing.

He is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT), Yale University, and Central European University and serves on numerous (advisory) boards, including Sparks and Honey, Center for Media, Data and Society, among others. He is also Founder and Curator in Chief of The Living Library.

In 2018, he was recognized as one of the 10 Most Influential Academics in Digital Government globally (as part of the Top 100 in Digital Government) by the global policy platform Apolitical.

Stefaan Verhulst is also a member of the Global AI Ethics Consortium and project lead of the IEAI-funded project *The Ethics and Practice of AI Localism at a time of COVID-19 and beyond*.

He is one of the principal investigators in the IEAI-funded research project [The Ethics and Practice of AI Localism at a time of COVID-19 and beyond](#).

Grappling with COVID-19 and other challenges, cities worldwide are mobilizing AI technologies to help trace patient contacts, automate decision-making, and monitor citizen movements. These developments are part of the emergence of AI Localism, a term coined by Stefaan Verhulst and Mona Sloane for a new and radical shift of AI governance from the national to the local level. While local AI leadership offers greater agility and potential for innovation, the urgency of the crisis has left little time to address ethical and human rights questions, and inform city officials of potential risks.

This project will identify successful, equitable and democratic global examples of local AI use and governance for COVID-19 as well as risks and challenges, including problematic AI applications, public concerns, and conflicts over AI use between cities and state and non-state actors. The project goal is to determine characteristics of success and share successful approaches that can be emulated by cities worldwide.

The Global AI Ethics Consortium (GAIEC)



Independent academic research plays a fundamental role in designing and implementing frameworks and guidelines for the development and use of AI-based technologies. 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. Consequently, several experts across multiple continents agreed this spring to form a [Global AI Ethics Consortium \(GAIEC\)](#). We have continued to grow to currently 20 experts from 6 continents, with members from 16 academic and research institutions in Germany, Spain, Brazil, the UK, Singapore, France, Japan, Belgium, Ghana, Australia, the US and China. The GAIEC aims to foster collaboration on research related to AI ethics, as well promote guidelines for the responsible development and use of AI-based technologies.