AI, Privacy, and Social Cohesion:
A Collaborative Futures Symposium

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Symposium Rationale

The Fourth Industrial Revolution that is being brought about by the evolutionary, "Cambrian explosion" in machine/deep learning systems and intelligent technology holds out promises of potentially radical and positive transformations of commerce, industry, politics and culture. But they also have potentials for profoundly exacerbating existing social, political and economic tensions and inequalities. Ensuring that the evolving dynamics of the intelligence revolution are humane, ethical, reduce the precarity of the least-advantaged, and enhance overall human resilience and wellbeing will require new kinds of collaborative learning and action, agenda-setting, and leadership.

Principles and guidelines for artificial intelligence and data governance universally proclaim the importance of aligning AI and data use with human values. Among the most commonly cited values are accountability, transparency, safety, explainability, privacy and fairness.[1] Yet, as might be expected given the disparate origins of these principles and guidelines, these "core" values are often very differently understood and weighted, and the meaning of alignment with them can vary greatly depending on national and cultural contexts.

Agreement is quite widespread on the meaning of accountable, explainable, and safe AI. Commitment to designing in alignment with these values often amounts to little more than commitment to best engineering practices since accountability, explanatory and safety shortfalls can typically be addressed as technical problems. That is, parameters for aligning with these values can be engineered into the design and use of AI tools. This is not the case with values like fairness and privacy. What it means to be fair and where to draw the line between the private and public spheres are hotly-debated ethical issues. Yet, the global nature of digital communication and computational infrastructures makes realizing a globally-shared—though not necessarily common—approach to data use and AI design a global governance imperative.

Privacy is one of the most frequently cited human values in AI ethics principles and guidelines. But, while concerns about data governance are apparently as common in Asia and Africa as they are in the Americas and Europe, there is no common "unit of analysis" for framing privacy concerns. Taking that unit to be the individual human being, the family, the corporation or the nation results in remarkably different conceptions of and concerns about privacy. Thus, while serious moral misgivings have been expressed in the U.S., for example, about police and security uses of facial recognition systems, these uses have been widely embraced in China as part of "smart governance" in the public interest. Differences in privacy concerns also vary greatly across generations. As "digital natives," global youth are significantly more comfortable with digital exposure than are "naturalized" netizens who are their nearest generational kin. Contrary

[1] For a useful evaluation of AI ethics guidelines, see: Hagendorff, Thilo. (2019). "The Ethics of AI Ethics: An Evaluation of Guidelines," in: arXiv:1903.03425, S. 1–15. (preprint).

arguments can be made on one hand that the data trails left by social media use, web-surfing, and online shopping and entertainment are the property of internet access and platform providers, and on the other hand that these data trails are digital DNA that should be subject to the same regulations as biological DNA, especially since it is now possible to engage in what amounts to the algorithmic simulation (and perhaps cloning) of personal identities. Privacy is not a singular, universal value; it is a topographically complex field of ethical concerns.

The legitimacy and importance of privacy concerns cannot be denied. Yet, commitments to AI design and data governance that are aligned with the value of privacy can be seen as in tension with commitments to the no less important human value of social cohesion. How well families, communities, and countries cohere or "hold together" dramatically affects how resilient they are in the face of potentially disruptive challenges. In fact, arguments can be made that ubiquitous, 24/7 digital connectivity is actively reshaping the dynamics of human sociality in ways that are complex, recursive and inherently qualitative. While increasing amounts of social energy are being redirected from physical to digital spaces, opening prospects for entirely new kinds of social cohesion, recent research in the neuroscience of communication suggest that asynchronous, digitally-mediated connectivity may compromise social learning, empathy, and emotional fluency. With the pandemic-necessitated embrace of online education, very real concerns are emerging about the possibility that coming generations of digital natives will be digitally socialized. Moreover, questions can be raised about the demographics and power dynamics of digitally-mediated social inclusion—questions about both who is included and whose interests are served. Cohesion can be elective, but it can also be coerced.

Just as concerns about privacy vary across national, cultural and generational boundaries, so do concerns regarding the interface of the personal and social that emerge with the normalization—and normativity—of what have been called the expository society and surveillance capitalism. This variation reflects differences in the degrees to which persons are conceived fundamentally as individual beings or as relational becomings. But it also reflects different depths of concern about how the epistemic power of digital connectivity is connected with its ontological power—the ways in which increasingly high volumes, varieties, and velocities of data about who each of us is, what we desire, and what we care about are being used to shape who we become, as citizens as well as consumers.

The complexity of the change dynamics being brought about by and through intelligent technology precludes the success of simple or one-size-fits-all responses. The global scale of these dynamics likewise precludes the viability of local, national or regional frameworks and guidelines and compels "ecologically-integrative" interactions across national, cultural and generational boundaries. The participants in the futures symposium on *AI, Privacy and Social Cohesion* will thus be drawn from within global academic, scientific, business, and policy-making communities, but also from within artistic and expressive communities. The small group and plenary discussions will be, among other things, opportunities to appreciate how much those involved differ-from each other while at the same time considering how best and most inclusively to differ-for one another in envisioning more humane and equitably shared global futures.