

The Global AI Ethics Consortium

on

The Importance of Public and Civil Society Participation in AI Governance

April 28th, 2021

The effort to make sure that technologies are beneficial to society needs to be a globally collaborative one. Academia, with its open-mindedness and its broad access to different disciplines and cultures, is an ideal place to connect and build international research communities, collaborative networks and global consortia working together on AI ethics-related issues.

With this in mind, the Global AI Ethics Consortium's (GAIEC) aim is to move out of the general and abstract theories, frameworks and guidelines and provide what is really needed: instructions for applying AI ethics in a way that is technically feasible and globally-minded.

Founded on April 15th, 2020 and joining together experts from more than 18 institutes across 6 continents, the GAIEC celebrates its first anniversary this month. In honor of that, we would like to take this opportunity to bring forward a topic of the utmost importance both in terms of the state of the global AI community and the use of AI in society: **the need for real and inclusive public and civil society participation in the AI governance process.**

Public deliberation is a cornerstone of participatory and representative governance and the creation of shared value within society. As such, any AI governance framework with the goal of improving societal well-being should not be developed and implemented behind closed doors, but with insights and buy-in from civil society as a relevant stakeholder.

While overly complex governance processes should not serve to stifle much needed innovation, real mechanisms are now needed to bring a public and civil society voice to the ongoing debates, at local and global levels, about how to govern the ever-increasing use of AI in our daily lives. We believe that **rapidly deploying new technologies, without sufficient consideration to societal and ethical implications and use of a participatory process that incorporates public voices from data subjects and their communities, risks unleashing a number of negative developments with much broader and longer-term effects.**

Independent academic research can play a fundamental role in designing and implementing AI frameworks that incorporate these mechanisms, but also in providing an understanding of what works in public deliberation over AI governance and how democratic processes are affected.

Academic expertise, drawn from across disciplines and geographies, is critical in helping guide governments, companies, NGOs and other actors navigate current uncertainties so that they can arrive at informed and justifiable responses to important questions and debates involving the employment of AI-based tools in society. Moreover, academia can play a stronger role in engaging directly with data subjects and their communities and civil society by promoting inclusivity in discussions of AI ethics and creating a space for substantial conversation on the topic with the public.

Consequently, the **Global AI Ethics Consortium has devoted its 2021 agenda to the overarching themes of strengthening the role of public and civil society participation in the AI governance process.** This includes pursuing collaborative research and engagement efforts that include among other topics:

1. The role of AI-enabled tools *in* the democratic process.
2. Implications for the use of AI-enabled tools *on* the democratic process.
3. Specifying inclusion and self-determination in what, and the extent to which inclusion is dependent on information access and empowerment.
4. Effective mechanisms (actors, techniques, methodologies, tools and frameworks) for REAL civil society participation in AI public and private governance.
5. Inclusive geographic approaches to reduce inequalities in discussion about AI governance and access to AI enabled and ethical technologies.
6. Exploring the place of AI within communities, to promote ethical decision-making as a shared exercise.
7. The role of the civil society in implementing AI effectively.
8. Public participation and its relationships to the rule of law.
9. How to ensure a multicultural approach of this civil society participation.
10. The role of technology assessment organizations or data ethics commissions in order to promote this civil society participation.

The GAIEC will take concrete steps toward engagement this year by creating resources for identifying and communicating with civil society groups working on the topic of ethical and responsible AI in the form of a *Civil Society for AI Ethics Directory*. We also aim to create strong partnerships with existing civil society groups by including them in our events and conferences and developing projects that investigate these topics mentioned above with the goal of also bringing civil society groups into that research process.

The time to think globally about an AI governance framework that reinforces rather than undermines democratic values is now. We welcome the opportunity to explore this topic in 2021 and beyond.

Sincerely,

The Global AI Ethics Consortium