

The Ethics and Practice of AI Localism at a Time of COVID-19 and Beyond.

This new yearlong project is part of the IEAI's efforts to promote research on the use of AI to manage pandemics, while at the same time building upon our partnerships with our Global AI Ethics Consortium (GAIEC) Members. It is a collaboration between the TUM School of Governance, The GovLab and the Alliance for Public Interest Technology at New York University and the Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Digital Ethics at the University of Melbourne.

As they grapple with COVID-19 and other challenges, cities around the world are mobilizing AI technologies to trace patient contacts, automate decision-making and monitor citizen movement and compliance with social distancing and quarantine. These developments are part of the emergence of AI Localism, a term coined by two of the project leads, 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. It has also left little time for international comparison of which COVID-19-related AI Localism approaches work most effectively.

This project aims to fill these gaps. It will compare COVID-19-related AI Localism in three cities on three continents - Melbourne, Australia, New York City, USA and Munich, Germany - to identify different categories of successful and ethical AI Localism in the context of COVID-19. At the same time, the project will identify 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.



In 2020, the first two of three project phases were initiated. This included a comparative review of COVID-19-related AI technologies and new governance approaches being developed and deployed at the city level; and the identification of public perceptions on ethical dimensions of AI localism and collection of examples local COVID-19-related AI technologies and governance approaches that are aligned or misaligned with these perceptions.

To this end, relevant AI Localism cases were identified in all three countries and preparations were made for experimental and comparative studies.

Plans for 2021

In 2021, studies will be conducted across all three of the chosen sites. Different categories of successful and ethical AI localism in the context of COVID-19 will be identified and ultimately a toolkit and training modules for city officials will be developed to help them advance local leadership in COVID-19-related technology and governance. ●

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