

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



AI and Youth 2020: Win the Battle, Lose the War?

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Paper presented at the Youth Knowledge Forum, 'New Times, New Methods'

Exploring youth research methods in the context of COVID-19

29 October, 2020

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'If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be utterly ruined.' — Plutarch

A Pyrrhic victory is one in which the costs of winning are so great that the victory is equivalent to defeat. Policy makers must consider this dilemma when crafting policy in response to the hegemony of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, which encompasses artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain technologies.

My caution in this brief paper is that attempting to get policy 'right' in this niche area is, to some extent, a fool's errand or Pyrrhic victory. Undue focus here distracts leaders from addressing more urgent problems that, if left neglected, will fester in ways that undermine the societal value of nuanced tech policy. Alternative responses must be explored instead, such as targeted measures of technological restraint, including bans and other acts of prohibition (e.g. facial recognition technologies).¹

In contemporary debate, the terms 'AI ethics' and 'data ethics' serve as touchstones for policy makers keen to craft cutting edge regulation on tech policy, be it for youth or adults.² These traditions are criticized for being hollow vehicles for corporate 'ethics washing,' a diversionary tactic in which social change is alluded to by those in power but never realized given a connected need for real structural change.³ In an attempt to lend nuance to this area, Carly Kind, Director of the UK's Ada Lovelace Institute, argues that AI ethics should be understood as having occurred in three 'waves.' She writes:

The first wave, [is] defined by principles and dominated by philosophers, and the second wave, led by computer scientists and geared towards technical fixes. Third-wave ethical AI has seen a Dutch Court shut down an algorithmic fraud detection system, students in the UK take to the streets to protest against algorithmically-decided exam results, and US companies voluntarily restrict their sales of facial recognition technology.⁴

Kind goes on to argue that third-wave AI ethics transcends principles and technical affordances by leveraging 'practical mechanisms' that rectify power imbalances and bring about justice for individuals and society. Elsewhere, scholars argue that the failure of AI ethics

¹ This paper synthesizes that argument. Additional responses relevant to youth and tech policy in Europe are developed in [The Pineapple Report, Feb 2019](#) and [Algorithmic Silence](#), Penn, 2021.

² [Manufacturing an Artificial Intelligence Revolution, Nov 2017](#)

³ [Terms of inclusion: Data, discourse, violence, Sept 2020](#)

⁴ [The term 'ethical AI' is finally starting to mean something, Aug 2020](#)

as a touchstone is its focus on ‘ethics.’ This framing upholds a form of “Imagined Objectivity” wherein harm is caused by an individual or technical system rather than by the structural power differentials in which an individual or system operates. Intersectional feminists suggest, then, that policy makers alter the language they use to address such harms, such as by moving from notions of ‘ethics’ to ‘justice’ for example. The following chart gives additional examples:

| <u>“Imagined Objectivity”</u> | <u>“Real Objectivity”</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Concepts That Secure Power</i> | <i>Concepts That Challenge Power</i> |
| Ethics | Justice |
| Bias | Oppression |
| Fairness | Equity |
| Accountability | Co-liberation |
| Transparency | Reflexivity |
| Understanding algorithms | Understanding history, culture, context ⁵ |

In a related vein, other scholars argue that AI should be understood as an *ideology* rather than a simple ‘basket of algorithms’ given its influence over language choice and related conceptions of the future.⁶ Bolstering this interpretation is the fact that AI technologies require significant technological and human infrastructure in order to operate adequately, as evidenced by recent studies of ghost work and gig work.⁷ Stated differently, AI tools do operate for free; they are not nearly as autonomous and self-improving as they are sometimes marketed to be. A sober audit of such inputs problematizes conceptions of rapid social progress reached at marginal cost.

These critiques underline that strategies of outright resistance and refusal blossom among the ‘new methods’ available to policy makers in the ‘new times’ brought about COVID-19. To conclude, I foster a metaphor that I hope will lend subtly to dialogue about this crossroads. In sheet music—indeed, in music composition generally—special notation is used to convey the role of a deliberative silence. These constructions build negative space purposefully, as a mode of art. Without rests, music would be cacophony. A recent wave of legal prohibitions on facial recognition technologies across American cities substantiate deliberative restraint in response to automation. U.S. communities have opted to preserve what I call an *algorithmic silence*: the purposeful exclusion of highly abstract algorithmic methods from human decision-making environments.⁸

⁵ [Data Feminism, p. 60, 2020](#)

⁶ [AI is an Ideology, Not a Technology, March 2020](#)

⁷ [Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass, 2019](#)

⁸ Algorithmic Silence, Penn, 2021

A silence of this type asserts that the value of such theory is worth more to the community when left unrealized. Such acts of prohibition leave room to incorporate holistic thinking about the myriad ways that advanced decision systems re-shape and bear upon human societies. Bans and moratoriums hold a space for reflection on the systemic burdens disguised by disingenuous rhetoric and incremental reformism. It provides the proverbial 'frog' with the interruption necessary to recognize that it is in the proverbial 'boiling pot.'

Policy makers, in partnership with youth, can use algorithmic silences to craft spaces for youth (and adults) to grow free from the strong influence of technological ideologies like those outlined above. Just as time limits on the working day have led to greater productivity and satisfaction at work, the exercise of limits on advanced digital technologies will improve life for the next generation.