

EVOLUTION FROM A SOCIAL ANIMAL TO A VIRTUAL ANIMAL? USING NEW TECH AND AI RESPONSIBLY DURING AND POST-COVID-19 CRISIS PERIOD



“Man is by nature a social animal” proclaimed Aristotle. This characteristic has made us organize into complex hierarchical societies where individuals are interdependent to satisfy basic necessities. Although we all know that social distancing is the most effective way to contain the spread of coronavirus, this is something biologically unnatural for humans.^[1] In this health emergency, many governments have decided to impose strict measures to limit social interactions to an absolute minimum. Lockdowns, limitations of movement of people and closure of borders have all been necessary measures for the good of societies.

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To this end, law enforcement agencies and security services were tasked with the difficult responsibility of imposing social isolation to protect people. They have found themselves thrust into the middle of an unparalleled situation, playing a critical role in halting the spread of the virus and preserving public safety and social order in the process. For some, the answer to control our instinct of socialisation was to increase surveillance globally. To achieve this complex mission, some governmental entities turned to emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) for support in unique and innovative ways, namely through digital tracking and physical surveillance technology.



At the time of writing this article,^[2] digital tracking measures, that include the use of mobile location data to track citizens and their contacts, have been introduced in 30 countries. Additionally, at least 9 countries are using advanced physical surveillance technologies, including facial recognition cameras equipped with heat sensors, surveillance drones and extensive closed-circuit television (CCTV) networks. With the number of deaths increasing at an alarming rate, we can assume that in the coming days, weeks and months we will most likely see more countries adopting these measures, and more AI and related technologies come to the fore.

However, governments around the world using or considering to use these approaches must ensure that they are proportionate, necessary and legitimate during these unprecedented times. While the application of technology can play an important role in seizing the reins during this crisis, we must not forget that its use can raise very real and serious human rights concerns that can undermine the trust placed in the government by communities. Human rights, civil liberties and the fundamental principles of law may be exposed or damaged, if we do not tread this path with great caution. In a public statement on 24th February to the UN Human Rights Council,^[3] the UN's Secretary-General António Guterres acknowledged that "The digital age has opened new frontiers of human welfare, knowledge and exploration. Yet new technologies are too often used to violate rights through surveillance, repression and online harassment and hate. Advances such as facial recognition software, robotics, digital identification and biotechnology, must not be used to erode human rights, deepen inequality or exacerbate existing discrimination."



As we recommended in a recent article,[\[4\]](#) to avoid infringement of human rights, law enforcement agencies around the world should opt to use the following steps in accessing and utilising data:

Data

anonymisation: Instead of identifying individuals and their contacts, some countries are collecting anonymized data to study the movement of people in a more general manner. This option still provides governments with the ability to track the movement of large groups but minimises the risk of infringing data privacy rights. However, governments should also guarantee that data sets cannot be “de-anonymised.”[\[5\]](#)

Purpose limitation: Personal data that is collected and processed to track the spread of the coronavirus should not be reused for another purpose. National authorities should seek to ensure that the large amounts of personal and medical data are exclusively used for public health reasons. This is a concept already in force in Europe, within the context of the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[\[6\]](#) that can serve as a foundation to develop global best practices on the use of data.

Knowledge-sharing and Open

Data access: To fight

this novel virus, data and research findings should be shared between international key stakeholders in the community, including the public and private sectors, and civil society organizations. Similar to some science institutions and universities, the World Health Organization (WHO) is gathering the latest international scientific findings and knowledge [7] on an open access COVID-19 database.



Time limitation: Governments should provide a clear timeline to the use of these tracking tools and clarify what will be the end of the data collected during this period. Alternatives have suggested storing personal data for a limited period of time. [8] Although the end of this pandemic seems very far away at this point in time, it will come to an end. And when it does, national authorities will need to scale back their newly acquired monitoring capabilities.

During this time of great need, humanity's inherent instinct for socialisation can be dangerous. The coronavirus pandemic has led to several innovative uses of new technology that could play a major role in curbing the effects that this instinct could have on our global health and well-being. It is important, however, to not let consideration of fundamental principles and rights be set aside.

At the same time, it is equally important to empower citizens by keeping them updated with relevant and reliable information, self-motivating the population to cooperate with the public authorities. Building trust in science, politics and media may avoid the need for strict monitoring and opens the door for free self-responsible communities.

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All those employing such powerful technologies have an enormous responsibility in their hands. It is a responsibility that can very much shape the freedoms of the future of our society. Wired through millions of years of evolution to be social creatures, citizens also have the responsibility of following social restriction measures and adopting virtual alternatives of connection. Arguably, the pandemic may also be contributing to humanity taking the next step in its evolution, moving from a “social animal” to a “virtual animal” as we explore alternatives that can fulfil our nature as social creatures. Should our new post-COVID-19 world be characterized by increased digitization and accelerated automation, which is highly likely, the importance of using technology responsibly becomes even more essential.

UNICRI Centre for AI and Robotics

UNICRI established a specialized Centre for AI and Robotics in The Hague. The Centre is one of the few international entities dedicated to specifically looking at AI, robotics and related technologies vis-à-vis crime prevention and control, criminal justice, rule of law and security. It assists national authorities, in particular law enforcement agencies, to understand the opportunities presented by these technologies and, at the same time, to navigate the potential pitfalls associated with them. Working closely with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), UNICRI has set up a global platform for law enforcement, fostering discussion on AI, identifying practical use cases and defining principles for responsible use. On the last topic, a ‘toolkit’ for responsible AI innovation by law enforcement is being elaborated that will contain valuable guidance and support for law enforcement in developing, deploying and using AI in a trustworthy and lawful manner. Soft law approaches such as this toolkit can make a valuable contribution to AI governance, particularly in the law enforcement domain where the use of this technology is truly an edge case.

^[1] Winder, I. C. & Shaw, V. (2020, Mar 25). Coronavirus: experts in evolution explain why social

distancing feels so unnatural. The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-experts-in-evolution-explain-why-social-distancing-feels-so-unnatural-134271>

[2] Woodhams, S. (2020, Apr 20). COVID-19 Digital Rights Tracker. Top 10 VPN. Retrieved from <https://www.top10vpn.com/news/surveillance/covid-19-digital-rights-tracker/>

[3] Guterres, A. (2020, Feb 24). The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights. Geneva, Switzerland, UN Human Rights Council. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-02-24/secretary-generals-remarks-the-un-human-rights-council-“the-highest-aspiration-call-action-for-human-rights-delivered-scroll-down-for-all-english>

[4] Beridze, I. & Minevich, M. (2020, Apr 2). Using AI responsibly to fight the coronavirus pandemic. TechCrunch. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/02/using-ai-responsibly-to-fight-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

[5] Pegg, D & Lewis, P. (2020, Apr 13). NHS coronavirus app: memo discussed giving ministers power to 'de-anonymise' users. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/nhs-coronavirus-app-memo-discussed-giving-ministers-power-to-de-anonymise-users>

[6] GDPR, Recital 54. European Union. Retrieved from <http://www.privacy-regulation.eu/en/r54.htm>

[7] World Health Organization. Global research on coronavirus disease (COVID-19). United Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>

[8] Simula. (2020, Mar 27). ENG: Simula is working with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.simula.no/news/eng-simula-working-norwegian-institute-public-health>