Digitalisation & Society

EUROPEAN AI FUND

European AI Fund is one of the programmes of NEF working on the impact of digitalisation on our societies

"Many of the ethical and human rights challenges we have identified in AI are also potential risks in the global (tech) response to COVID-19."

The European AI Fund is a philanthropic initiative to shape the direction of AI in Europe. Its long-term vision is to promote an ecosystem of European public interest and civil society organisations working on policy and technology, based on a diversity of actors and a plurality of goals that represents society as a whole.

Frederike Kaltheuner is the Director of the European AI fund
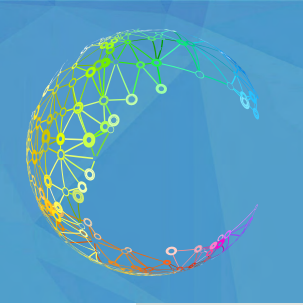**Alexandra Toth is the Programme Manager of the European AI fund**

Frederike: *"When we talk about AI, tech and Covid-19, it's essential to think of the implications they have on civil society and individuals. We are observing a well-established pattern in tech: fast tech solutions are moving ahead of regulation, but these tech solutions contain and reinforce structural biases. As a result, the pandemic — and specifically the technology deployed quickly to deal with the pandemic's impact — exacerbates existing structural inequalities. For this reason, the work of our partner organisations is crucial to ensure that these issues come to light and propose ways to tackle them."*

Alexandra: *"Now more than before, we need to ask ourselves which society we want to live in and the role of data in it. Before the pandemic outbreak, the European AI Fund was conceptualised as a philanthropic endeavor to strengthen an emerging ecosystem, reaching beyond digital rights organisations. Over the summer of 2020, we set up a funding stream dedicated to supporting organisations and research groups that monitor, and critically analyse the role that data play in the current tech response to the pandemic. We believe that Europe has a role to play in shaping tech — including AI — in a way that puts the needs of people and society first."*

FREDERIKE

ALEXANDRA

Frederike: *"Having said that, regulation is key to guarantee that all actors — including the big platform companies — play by the rules. But in the last years, it has become more evident how Google and Apple control their app stores. They even regulate whether a public health authority can publish an app in their country. We rely on civil society and universities to lead on the analysis and push back against centralised contact tracing, for example. Policy makers in Europe could pave the way for more regulation, accountability, and transparency.*

We have also noticed that with better understanding of the implications of tech and AI on society, and democracy, more and more foundations include a tech component within their strategies. We hope to engage more foundations across Europe in this reflection and in our work."

Alexandra: *"As part of our convening role, we organised in September 2021 an online event to provide opportunities for our partners to engage with policy makers and showcase their work at the intersection of Tech, AI and Covid. Despite the current 'physical distancing' context, we recognise the urgency to deepen the collaboration between civil society actors and emerging groups to influence the European and member states' tech policy agenda."*
independent journalists for reliable information."

The Ada Lovelace Institute

The Ada Lovelace Institute is an independent research institute and deliberative body with a mission to ensure data and AI work for people and society. Through research, policy and practice, they aim to ensure that the transformative power of data and AI is used and harnessed in ways that maximise social wellbeing and put technology at the service of humanity.

Andrew Strait is the Associate Director at the Ada Lovelace Institute, a grantee partner of the European AI Fund

"With Covid-19 a range of ethical, societal and human rights arguments on both sides of the ongoing debate about vaccination certificates/immunity passports have surfaced. These arguments are often conflated with the complex public health considerations, including the lack of evidence about the long-term effectiveness of vaccines/immunity. The complexity of this issue warrants at the very least a pause on the roll-out of both public and private sector initiatives until evidence can be gathered, debates convened, and experts enabled to advise on an ethical and sustainable approach to vaccine certification that ensures that human rights are respected, and which doesn't further exacerbate the disproportionate impact of the crisis on the most vulnerable.

Throughout our project, we were invited to three private discussions with the UK taskforce and briefed the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove directly in a small group call, as well as briefing the Public Affairs and Constitutional Committee in advance of Mr. Gove giving evidence to the Committee.

We have become the leading voice and expert body on vaccine passports in national and international conversations. Our work is referenced in expert reports including by the European Data Protection Board.

Having said that, we were very happy to see a shift in UK policy on vaccination passports. After several briefings with Ada, against all odds, the government has committed to bringing legislative proposals once vaccine passports are introduced. It has committed to exemptions, has outlined spaces where they can't be used, has committed to conducting formal piloting, and has pledged to provide paper-based alternatives in the event a digital system is adopted.

We surfaced our work throughout the project, which helped generating contributory impact alongside other actors in the ecosystem. Our call for evidence was a marker in the sand. The event series started to publicly excavate some of the debates around different disciplinary collectives; and we were able to conduct lots of briefing, events, and respond to incoming requests even before the final report was released. Our advocacy work with the UK government was done privately and ahead of publications, building trust.

We also managed to connect experts (who have something to say without drawing on existing literature) and helped them build expertise on vaccine passports. This way economists learned about immunology, tech and privacy experts learned about history and public health."