



THE DIGITAL OATH COALITION

A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO HUMAN-CENTERED DIGITAL ETHICS

Background

The parameters of the digital age today show a change in the conception of time, space, identity, society, and everything related to the life of individuals and communities¹. More and more complex machines are replacing humans in decision-making roles, and there seems to be no limits for upcoming innovation. ‘Scientific and technological progress might change people’s capabilities or incentives in ways that could destabilize civilization’².

As an example: privacy. The personal data of billions of people is stored on the internet and processed using complex data tools in many cases in ways explicit to influence the user’s decision-making process. Fundamental values such as freedom of thought and respect for privacy are at stake and there is a need for a new narrative³ as the world faces the future with perplexity and uncertainty⁴.

¹ Benanti, P. (2020). Digital Age: Teoria Del Cambio d’epoca: Persona, Famiglia e Società. Attualità e Storia. San Paolo. <https://books.google.it/books?id=c8CHzQEACAAJ> - Chapter 2

² Bostrom, Nick. (2019). The Vulnerable World Hypothesis. Global Policy. 10. 10.1111/1758-5899.12718. - Volume 10. Issue 4

³ Floridi, Luciano. (2014). The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Changing Human Reality. - Chapter 10

⁴ Richmond, Sheldon. (2015). Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies. By Nick Bostrom. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, pp. 317. ISBN: 9780199678112. Philosophy. -1. 1-6. 10.1017/S0031819115000340

In this context, high-value action is crucial and urgent. Governments and cultural entities worldwide have been trying to regulate, analyze, manage, and define metrics, policies, frameworks, and rules⁵ to limit uncertainty and try to minimize perplexity. These focus on the outcome of engineers' and computer scientists' – the digital actors – efforts from the simplest to the most complex systems they build and create for countless objectives and purposes, and from the lowest-risk to the highest-risk systems. These rules and regulations are a full-sized step forward but cannot contain all risks of the machine intelligence revolution, nor can they bridge the gaps between principles and practice. This is where the urgency of a **Digital Oath**, similar to the classic Hippocratic Oath⁶, comes into place.

The Digital Oath

Concept

The aim of the Digital Oath is to suggest a list of ethical guidelines and guardrails to ensure that every step of the design and creation of digital systems is human-centered and no-harmful for the present and the future of humanity.

Its purpose is to make the world increasingly safe, creative, and respectful of human dignity and environment, as proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Digital Oath provides ethical guidelines for digital actors to address positively the challenges of their work. It helps them to understand what is not to do – DO NOT HARM –, how to proceed – DO GOOD –, and to take responsibility for their work.

Target

This Digital Oath formulation aims to encourage all digital actors to work together for better digital systems where people and communities are the priority, with no one left behind.

The Oath targets engineers, software and hardware designers, data and computer scientists, and all digital actors directly involved in new technologies and solutions' development. Content creators (influencers, journalists, and any writer on the internet) and simple digital users are called to play the fundamental role of supporters and promoters.

⁵ AlgorithmWatch, "AI Ethics Guidelines Global Inventory" <https://algorithmwatch.org/en/ai-ethics-guidelines-global-inventory/> - Date Last Accessed: April 29, 2023

⁶ Edelstein, Ludwig (1943). The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation and Interpretation. ISBN 978-0-8018-0184-6

Content of Digital Oath

1- Guard rails - Non-maleficent pledges

- Pledge to not harm individuals, peoples, or communities and their dignity, rights, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and privacy.
- Pledge to be aware of how the system is being built: make sure its goals and intentions generate no potential danger or negative risk in any environment.
- Pledge to design a trustworthy system coherent with my professional knowledge and my moral standards.
- Pledge to prevent and limit the realization of risks and unwanted outcomes by making the digital system robust, safe, secure, and resilient.
- Pledge to responsibly create and design a transparent, explainable, and accountable system.
- Pledge to be inclusive, just, fair, unbiased (*and human-centered*) in creating and designing systems, data sets, and content and to refuse any attempts at harmful untruthful content creation.
- Pledge to develop sustainable digital systems in terms of materials usage and environmental impact.

2- Guidelines – Beneficent pledges

- Pledge to create and design systems that put human beings as individuals and as communities at the center and as the superior priority.
- Pledge to create and design systems that promote the common good and seek equality between individuals and peoples.
- Pledge to create and design systems that promote solidarity among individuals and between peoples and are especially helpful to the most vulnerable and fragile.
- Pledge to create and design systems that help solve the urgent ecological challenges and encourage sustainable-only digital systems.

3- Participation pledges

- Pledge to flag any system that does not abide by this oath and inform the closest professional ethical entity.
- Pledge to ask a professional when in doubt about any system not being coherent with this oath.
- Pledge to keep informed about any changes to this oath and ethical standards worldwide.
- Pledge responsibly to be accountable for any breach of this oath from my side.

The Digital Oath Coalition

The proposal to extend the Hippocratic Oath to the digital world has emerged in previous studies^{7,8} and researches⁹, therefore we encourage joining efforts for a coalition among universities, private sector, and organizations committed to the development of an ethics code.

Conclusion

In addition to public policies' approach to regulate the digital challenges, Digital Oath, with a bottom-up methodology aims to underline the preeminent involvement of the digital actors and their responsibility toward humanity. Additionally, the Digital Oath provides digital actors ethical purpose to their work, as the Hippocratic Oath.

Sponsors

The Digital Oath is sponsored by New Humanity, Sophia University, and NetOne.

The Digital Oath has been shaped by the Digital Oath Team, an international network of engineers, computer scientists, and experts in the field.

New Humanity¹⁰ of the Focolare Movement¹¹ is a faith-based and intergenerational NGO in General Consultative Status with the UN ECOSOC and UNESCO, FAO, UNEP's official partner. Founded in 1986, it is active in more than 100 countries worldwide. It aims to contribute to achieving the unity of the human family, recognizing the integral dignity and development of all human beings and the urgency of caring for nature. Its main fields of action are Economic and Social Sustainable Development, Human Rights, Peace Education and Global Citizenship, and Partnership for Human Fraternity.

Sophia University¹² is a private international multicultural university based in Italy. The academic program (Masters and PhDs) provides an inter and trans-disciplinary approach, to foster dialogue among cultures and religions.

⁷ American Hospital Association, "Is It Time to Develop a Digital Hippocratic Oath?" <https://www.aha.org/aha-center-health-innovation-market-scan/2022-02-22-it-time-develop-digital-hippocratic-oath> - Date Last Accessed: April 29, 2023

⁸ Etzioni, O. "A Hippocratic Oath for artificial intelligence practitioners" <https://techcrunch.com/2018/03/14/a-hippocratic-oath-for-artificial-intelligence-practitioners/> Date Published: March 14, 2018 - Date Last Accessed: April 29, 2023

⁹ Stiffman, E., & Tumolillo, M. A. (2019). Hippocratic Oath for a Digital World: Insights From SSIR's 2019 Data on Purpose Conference. Stanford Social Innovation Review. <https://doi.org/10.48558/FWJ1-SK74>

¹⁰ <https://www.new-humanity.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.focolare.org/>

¹² <https://www.sophiauniversity.org/en/>

NetOne¹³ It is an international association of professionals, scholars, researchers and operators of communication and information technology. It is a space for dialogue where professional experiences, cultural insights, training courses, actions and projects help to develop fraternity through media.

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¹³ <https://www.net-one.org/en/>