BOARD #141: Work in Progress: Developing a Permanent Symposium on AI: an auto-ethnography

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Abstract

Decision-makers worldwide face complex AI challenges, often without sufficient input from non-technical stakeholders, resulting in a democratic deficit. To address this, we propose the Permanent Symposium on AI (PSAI), a novel facilitation of inclusive, interdisciplinary, global dialogue on AI. This work-in-progress study is part of a larger research project investigating the challenges and gaps between governance and technical expertise in AI decision-making. This study leverages a Grounded Theory Autoethnographic (GTA) approach to document the end-to-end development and design considerations in envisioning the PSAI. Our approach will inform the future design choices in developing and testing of the PSAI - ensuring transparency, contextual relevance, and effectiveness. This specific auto-ethnographic endeavor seeks to highlight the need for a Permanent Symposium on AI and document the considerations, challenges, and hopes in designing one.

1 Introduction

The rapid development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have brought about unprecedented opportunities for innovation and growth. However, these advancements have also raised fundamental questions about the governance and accountability of AI systems. Decision-makers in AI, including policymakers, industry leaders, and technologists, are grappling with a series of complex and interconnected challenges. These include ensuring transparency and explainability in AI decision-making, addressing biases and discrimination in AI systems, and mitigating the risks of AI-driven displacement and job loss.

Despite the urgency and importance of these issues, the conversations around AI governance are often limited to a narrow set of stakeholders and perspectives. The absence of diverse voices and interests in these discussions can lead to AI systems that perpetuate

existing social inequalities and exacerbate existing power imbalances. Furthermore, the lack of representation and participation from marginalized communities can result in AI systems that are not responsive to their needs and concerns. To their credit, decision-makers and AI manufacturers are acknowledging the limitations of current approaches to AI governance and are actively seeking solutions. They are recognizing the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches to AI development and deployment, and are exploring new mechanisms for ensuring accountability and transparency in AI systems. This paper aims to contribute to these efforts by exploring the socio-technical implications of AI governance and identifying opportunities for more inclusive and equitable approaches to AI development and deployment. Many organizations, such as MILA, the CAIDP, the Aula Fellowship, universities, online training programs (Coursera, EdX), tech companies, consultancies, governments (e.g., US, UK, Canada, Norway, Kenya, Nigeria, France) and more, have answered the call with engagement programs.

One such program is the Permanent Symposium on AI (PSAI), developed by The Aula Fellowship (1). The authors propose to build an online, global forum for conversations on AI in society. The PSAI is organized around the hard questions in AI and hosted by Universities, NGOs, companies and governments, embedded in their communities. The forum provides a platform for a distributed discussion of AI topics, the opportunity for consensus to emerge on the issues, and the legitimacy for leaders to take action on those consensuses.

We have identified 3 required work-streams for the PSAI, including:

- PSAI: a low-latency, low-data forum for discussion and organized engagement with categories of hard questions, for all 8.5 billion of us. That's a lot of people. We estimate that with 250 host organizations, we can cover a statistically significant portion of the world population. Hosts may be universities, large companies, religious organizations, or state organisations.
- AI Voice: AI Literacy, publications, engagement in hard questions such as on media, truth, and art.
- TechAirs: Public AI Incident Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting. Engagement with hard questions on justice, defense, education.

Beta testing has been approved in principle by our university partners, where we will build a proto-PSAI for people, including the general public, the community, staff, families, etc,. to access through the university network. Seventeen volunteers are currently on the

project, many of them from the university partners. The Aula Fellowship's mission as a non-profit is the reason for the project. The Aula Fellowship is a think tank and nascent institute for AI & Society. Many of our volunteers, including the authors of this work in progress, are Aula Fellows. The mission of the organization is to get everyone to the table on AI.

The principle is that when people of all parts of our society can talk together about how AI is developing as an infrastructure in society, about who makes key decisions on how the tech will be used and to whose benefit, then we all gain in the implementation of these tools, including the planet.

Ours is not an empty hope.

The processes of institutionalization, as described by scholars (2; 3; 4), is such that when people converge on shared ideas, they create political legitimacy for those ideas to be implemented into society as institutional practices. It is an outsized problem for an individual for good reason. The processes of social change require the involvement of a lot of people because society isn't susceptible to being changed by lone actors, but rather by the concerted efforts of people working together. (about 3% of a given group (5)), The fruit of those efforts are the direct consequences of the work of coalitions within society. As such, the PSAI is designed to empower the collaborations and the conversations that produce political legitimacy for needed change.

This is particularly important in AI because the consequences of getting it wrong are already being felt in society (6; 7), and there are people with power who are mobilizing ideological forces to work against public initiatives and inclusion in decision-making on how AI should be made, managed, and used (8).

2 Work in Progress Methods

Our study employs grounded theory autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology to explore the lived experiences and reflections of the research team throughout the project. Grounded Theory Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that integrates the systematic data analysis and theory development of Grounded Theory with the autobiographical and reflexive elements of Autoethnography (9).

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of research that draws on and analyzes the researcher's personal experiences, connecting insights to self-identity, cultural rules, and resources (10). We undertook an analytical autoethnography approach (e.g., (11; 12; 13)), and focused on pragmatic reflections. As a team we continue to track the process and progress of the project, fostering a conscious process of co-creation among team members. Longer term, this autoethnographic approach will enable us to share our process with others, including historians, researchers, and climate change advocates, promoting transparency and maximal ethical accountability.

By making our decision-making processes publicly accessible, we invite scrutiny and collaboration, attracting potential allies for future partnerships. This reflexive methodology allows us to critically examine our own biases, assumptions, and values, ensuring that our research is grounded in a deep understanding of our own positionalities and the cultural context in which we operate.

In addition to personal notes, researchers and project team members from Aula are documenting their activities in a shared drive. Each activity in this chronology of activities has provided notes, primary documents, and methods that will inform the autoethnography. Our approach involves collecting and analyzing personal data through reflective journals and observations, and then using Grounded Theory coding methods to identify patterns and themes from these auto-ethnographic data. By combining these two methodologies, we plan to develop a nuanced and holistic understanding of the personal experiences of participants along with the cultural context in which they are situated, while also contributing subsequently to the development of theory that is grounded in personal experience and cultural analysis. This approach allows researchers to explore their own biases, assumptions, and values, and to situate their experiences within broader cultural and social structures, ultimately providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon.

3 Preliminary Results

Our study fits into the larger research agenda for designing and testing the PSAI. Our larger study addresses three research questions:

- What are the primary challenges and perceived gaps between governance and technical expertise in AI decision-making?
- How can (and why should) the PSAI platform facilitate inclusive, interdisciplinary

dialogue and address these challenges?

- What are the key factors influencing the future adoption and scalability of the PSAI platform?

3.1 Primary challenges and perceived gaps between governance and technical expertise in AI decision-making

Overall, several challenges to setting up the symposium have been identified by the teams. These include: (1) Tech challenges: data sovereignty as much as possible. (2) Low latency world-wide, (3) Governance challenges: data jurisdiction rules, (4) Political challenges: legitimizing the PSAI as a voice for political change, and (5) Resource challenges: financing the team and contract/mandate specialists. To face these challenges, the project team will be onboarding collaborators, measuring and documenting results, and preparing regular public reports on progress through social media and professional networks. This work in progress is part of a larger autoethnographic research that serves both as a record of these activities and a source of guidance for meeting the challenges.

3.2 PSAI to facilitate inclusive, interdisciplinary dialogue

The conceptual framework being built identifies three core dimensions, based on reflective perceptions of our author participants. These reflections span dimensions of AI governance challenges: stakeholder representation, cross-disciplinary engagement, and technical literacy gaps. These dimensions form the foundation for designing the PSAI platform, ensuring it is both inclusive and contextually relevant. This work continues the reflection of this group of authors on a prior studies, examining the training of diverse groups of specialists to engage in the complex discussions on AI and society (14; 15; 16; 17). The principal insight at this preliminary stage is that the participants have aspirational goals of using their professional resources to build this project, and that they see this goal as being both personally and socially feasible.

4 Next Steps

Through the PSAI and the documentation of the process of its creation, our project aims to empower individuals with varying levels of technical expertise to engage in meaningful dialogue and decision-making processes around AI. AI literacy and the transfer of knowledge

between technical specialists and decision makers may be the key to building AI as constructive and fit to purpose infrastructure in society.The outcomes of the broader research will include: (1) a fully developed conceptual framework addressing AI engagement challenges (2) a prototype PSAI platform tested on an international university network, and (3) recommendations for scaling the platform through partnerships with universities, NGOs, and governments.

This initial work-in-progress aims to document incremental advancements toward achieving this broader objective, offering a transparent account of both our current approach and the challenges encountered along the way. Beyond merely sharing progress, this is also intended as a call to action inviting collaboration, feedback, and shared learning among peers, researchers, and engineering educators who are similarly committed to driving meaningful change in this area. By fostering a network of engaged contributors, we hope to build a stronger, more resilient foundation for long-term impact.

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Appendix A: Chronology of the Permanent Symposium on AI (PSAI)

- The need for a more inclusive AI governance process was first articulated by the MILA AI Institute and collaborators. As noted by Mackenzie et al. (2024), decision-makers face difficult questions in AI and currently lack sufficient representation in deliberative processes.
- The Aula Fellowship was formed with the mission of "bringing everyone to the conversation on AI."
- The initial strategic framework was drafted, titled *Our Levers of Power*.
- A deliberate decision was made to focus on the "hard questions" in AI—such as ethical, governance, and societal implications—rather than on treaties or narrowly-defined technical outputs. This direction was supported through op-eds, book proposals, and commissioned studies.
- The logical structure of the initiative was finalized. Two foundational insights were established:
  1. With the engagement of approximately 250 large organizations, it would be possible to involve a majority of the global population in AI deliberations.
  2. Preconditions for participation in the Permanent Symposium on AI (PSAI) include AI literacy and AI incident monitoring.
- A democratic and consensus-based decision-making model for topic selection was proposed. This model drew inspiration from:
  - The Icelandic constitutional reform process conducted online (18),
  - Annual in-person direct democracy practices in the Swiss canton of Glarus (19),
  - The political protocols of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (20).
- Early networking efforts began to connect sector-specific AI literacy resources across borders.

- The TechAIRS application and AI incident monitoring infrastructure were developed. Planning for field testing and eventual scaling began, including applications in the defense sector.
- An alliance was established with a UK-based NGO experienced in conducting mass public consultations, including previous work with the NHS.
- A comprehensive project description was drafted, outlining the PSAI's vision, goals, and operational structure.
- A beta-testing plan for the PSAI was created, with input from multiple university partners.
- Ten universities and research institutes agreed in principle to support the beta phase of PSAI implementation, with decentralized hosting responsibilities shared across the network.
- Prototype beta-test code for the PSAI was received from the development team. The system is not an AI, but rather an architecture supporting structured, text-based deliberation forums.
- Formal invitations were prepared and distributed to partner institutions to participate in the PSAI beta phase during 2025–2026.
- Participating institutions are requested to contribute:
  - Public access to PSAI via institutional intranet,
  - 4 hours per month of technical support,
  - One monthly in-person event,
  - $750 per month in administrative support for the duration of the project.