

Who is Deciding the Future Role of AI in Healthcare in the Nordics?

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The future role of AI in healthcare is largely seen as positive, inevitable, necessary, and driven by the private sector. These dominant narratives obscure decision-making about these future applications, with little room for political scrutiny, or public participation. Public, and private resources, are being funnelled to support various AI health technologies. By prioritising some and not others, we are being set on a path that will greatly impact our future health, lives, and societies. My research sheds light on these processes and provides tools to expand the scope for inclusive public participation in the debate on the future role of AI in healthcare.

Summary

Over the last few years there has been a considerable amount of hype around the potential role of AI in healthcare. This has greatly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, where we saw the rapid adoption of AI based technologies in healthcare.

However, beyond the broad claims of AI fixing any and all healthcare issues, there is a lack of understanding about the specific applications of AI in healthcare, and how decision-makers decide upon which of these to support with public resources. There is also little room for medical professionals and patients to have their say in what should be prioritised. Lack of diversity and representation in participation on healthcare undermines democracy given the vital role it plays in society.

This lack of transparency and participation is also worrying as public money and health data are being used to facilitate the development of some AI driven technologies in healthcare, and not others. As such, broad participation is required to ensure that these decisions are in line with the public good.

My research sheds light on the shifting power relations in the development and deployment of AI technologies in healthcare. I largely focus on the Nordic States, as trend setters in “ethical” AI development and its adoption in public and private healthcare. I explore these relationships at a variety of levels, from the impacts of global developments on AI health, down to how individual patients interact with these technologies on an everyday basis.

Beyond this, my work also develops tools to facilitate more inclusive discussions regarding the future role of AI in healthcare.

Research agenda

The dominant narratives

In the Nordics all the states claim that AI in health is inevitable, necessary, and justifiable as it will increase efficiency and reduce costs.ⁱ This mirrors developments in how the international community have recast AI in health as a saviour rather than a threat, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.ⁱⁱ

Yet the development, roll out and management of these technologies in the healthcare system can be seen as a radical shift away from the principles upon which the Nordic public health sector was built.ⁱⁱⁱ The use of public health data repositories for corporate actors to train AI is seen as a natural resource to be exploited, with the belief that sufficient check and balances can be created to manage risks. There is also broad agreement across the political spectrum in the Nordic states that AI in healthcare must increase in scope, and the private sector should be facilitated in achieving this goal.

Tools to increase participation

The dominant narratives make other future options difficult to comprehend. Only a handful of actors are deciding upon which path we should take. However, it is essential that we expand participation in discussing the role of AI in healthcare. This is not only fundamental due to the critical role healthcare plays in democracy, but it would also allow for greater political

scrutiny in where public resources are being allocated these technologies. It also opens up innovate scope, as more actors can have a say on a range of future applications of AI in healthcare.

To achieve this my research has explored ways to increase the inclusivity of discussion around the future of AI in healthcare. This includes approaches to co-create what we want this future to look like^{iv} and how to centralise the everyday experiences of patients and medical professionals with AI technologies to guide decision making.^v AI driven technologies, such as simulations, have also been used to support more inclusive participatory approaches. These allow policy makers to play out different scenarios to see how various digital technologies could be deployed in health crises response. This not only facilitates the co-creation of different futures, but also allows the participants to reflect on underlying assumptions and power relations in their decision-making process.^{vi}

Policy Highlights

- There is a lack of transparency around the decision-making on the future role of AI in healthcare in the Nordics.
- Careful regulation and clear red lines are needed if we are to avoid undermining the foundational principles of the Nordic model of public healthcare.
- The adoption of AI technologies will lock the public healthcare system into long-term reliance on the private sector.
- There is a need for greater and more inclusive public participation in the future role of AI in healthcare.

About the author

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He is leading the [AI and the Everyday Political Economy of Global Health](#) project grant, funded by WASP-HS (2021-2026) and is a co-organiser of the [Nordic Fabulation Network](#), funded by NordForsk (2023-2024).



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