

## INTERVIEW WITH JAMES WRIGHT

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*James Wright is a Research Associate at the Alan Turing Institute, the UK's national institute for data science and AI, where he is working on a project entitled "PATH-AI: Mapping an Intercultural Path to Privacy, Agency, and Trust in Human-AI Ecosystems." James' PhD in Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) at the University of Hong Kong, completed in 2018, studied the development and attempted implementation of care robots. He was also a visiting scholar at FFJ as part of the Michelin Fellowship program, where he worked on a comparative study of publicly funded care robot projects in the EU and Japan.*

**Firstly, thank you for having accepted our interview. We would also like to congratulate you on your current "PATH-AI" project at the Alan Turing Institute, especially for the interim project report recently published with David Leslie, Charles Raab, Fumi Kitagawa, Florian Ostmann, and Morgan Briggs: "Privacy, Agency and Trust in Human-AI Ecosystems: Interim Report".**

**Could you briefly present your current project "PATH-AI" and tell us how it came to be?**

PATH-AI is a joint project with RIKEN, Japan's largest comprehensive research institution, and the University of Edinburgh, and is supported by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Japan Science and Technology Agency (JST). The aim is to think about intercultural ethics and the governance of AI through the lens of three key concepts: privacy, agency, and trust.

PATH-AI started in early 2020, and as it has unfolded over the same timeframe as the COVID-19 pandemic, this has profoundly shaped our research approach. Responding to the societal challenges raised by the accelerated use of data-intensive digital technologies during the pandemic, we have been

examining how the complex interplay of privacy, agency, and trust has impacted public health responses in Japan and the UK. For example, I wrote [a paper about how the rhetoric of \*jishuku\* \("self-restraint"\) was mobilised by the Japanese government](#) to encourage and compel public compliance with their recommended health measures during the first year of the pandemic despite low public trust in government.

During the first phase of PATH-AI, we conducted remote interviews and surveys with 95 experts and members of the public across the UK and Japan, in order to compare attitudes to privacy, agency, and trust, particularly in relation to three different healthcare technologies: digital contact tracing apps, symptom checking tools, and care robots. Our initial results can be found in our Interim Report.

For the next part of our project, we are collaborating with Somerset House Studios and the University of the Arts London's Creative Computing Institute to commission three works by international artists which engage with the themes of our project and findings of our interim report, and which will be exhibited virtually by Somerset House in late 2022. The call attracted over 200 submissions which have been both globally diverse and of an extremely high quality, which is very exciting.

In the final phase of the project, we are planning to convene working groups comprised of stakeholders from digital rights organizations from around the world.

Rather than creating yet another AI ethics or governance framework, we plan to examine what is currently the most comprehensive global AI ethics framework – UNESCO’s recommendation on the ethics of AI, which have been adopted by its 193 member states – and explore in detail how the values and principles expounded in the framework relate to real world case studies viewed from intercultural perspectives. We aim for these working groups to outlast the end of the PATH-AI project next year, and contribute to ongoing international and intercultural collaboration on AI ethics and governance.

**To continue with your current project, how do you think a comparative analysis would be favourable for research on Human-AI Ecosystems?**

To date, academic and policy discussions about AI ethics and governance have tended to centre on Euro-American perspectives. Part of the aim of PATH-AI is to widen this view and consider how seemingly universal values like privacy, agency, and trust are understood differently across different cultural contexts, such as between Japan and the UK. We hope that understanding how these values can differ will help inform governance and regulatory frameworks as they continue to be developed, so that “Western” values aren’t simply imposed on the rest of the world by default in a new form of informational colonialism.

At the same time, we want to avoid setting up binary oppositions of East vs West, revisiting arguments about the supposed uniqueness of Japanese culture, or indeed assuming any conception of cultures as static, monolithic or geographically bounded entities. In this sense we aim to critically but constructively engage with the concept of interculturality itself and how culture is being or could be operationalized in international governance mechanisms.

**After your PhD, you were at FFJ as 2019 FFJ/ Michelin Fellow for your research project “Success and Failure of Public Innovation Policies in Japan. A Case Study of Care Robots”. How has this research fellowship program contributed to your subsequent research and/or career?**

The research fellowship at FFJ was extremely helpful in enabling me to consolidate my PhD research and lay the foundations for turning it into a monograph, while developing and expanding my research further into other digital care technologies. I was able to

broaden my professional network in France and across Europe, and was also supported to conduct fieldwork in Japan, which was hugely valuable in retrospect given the subsequent closure of the borders since the outbreak of COVID. This enabled me to conduct further research, maintain my relationships with existing research contacts and build new ones, which has greatly aided my subsequent research projects. Having the opportunity to organize an international workshop also provided great experience that I have been able to build on since. I continue to collaborate with friends and colleagues at FFJ, including via the INNOVCARE project, and overall the fellowship provided an extremely valuable stepping-stone between my PhD and postdoctoral research.

**In 2021, FFJ launched the INNOVCARE project: “Care-led Innovation: The case of elderly care in France and Japan”. As chair of the session 3 (“Which innovations in the field of eldercare? An assessment based on French and Japanese experiences”) at the first annual conference of the INNOVCARE project, could you tell us what UK experiences can have in common with French and Japanese ones?**

The UK, France, and Japan are each experiencing similar challenges, albeit to varying degrees: aging populations with growing care needs, difficulties hiring and retaining care staff, large and growing numbers of people providing informal care, a lack of high-quality care services or difficulty maintaining them where they do exist, and an unwillingness among politicians (and often among the public as well) to invest in care services and the people who provide them. New care technologies, such as care robots, are often framed as a possible solution to these challenges primarily by cutting costs and filling the growing gaps in care services – an approach sometimes

characterized as “better than nothing”. Unfortunately, as I have found in my research to date, many of these technologies in fact require additional human work and greater investment, and may not improve the quality of care services or help care workers, but on the contrary introduce new problems, complexities, risks, and precarities. I think this is partly due to a widespread lack of meaningful participatory development practices that involve end users in how new technologies are conceived and developed, and partly due to the lack of a broader perspective of care as a sociotechnical assemblage that is reliant on social and relational aspects. In my view, we should be trying to cultivate, foster and invest in human relationships of care rather

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than trying to replace them with technology. That is why I'm excited about the INNOVCARE project's focus on care-led innovation, shifting the starting point for innovation from technology to care.

***“In my view, we should be trying to cultivate, foster and invest in human relationships of care rather than trying to replace them with technology.”***

### What are your future projects?

I plan to continue working on healthcare technologies, with a particular focus on local sites and understandings of care. I'm especially interested in researching the connections and disconnections between the apparent trend, accelerated by COVID, of reducing human social interactions as societies grow increasingly “untact”, a word South Korean policymakers use to refer to the contactless provision of services including elder care; what in Japan is described as *muen shakai* – a “relationless society” in which the ties that bind have come undone; and what Katsuno Hirofumi and Daniel White call new “techno-intimacies” between humans and social robots, or other forms of commodified, technologically-mediated interactions with commercial products. The apparent shift away from human communication and social relationships in care and across wider society seems profound, and I wonder to what extent it is actually being manifested, particularly outside of metropolitan areas, and what forms of resistance may arise that reassert the primacy of “tact-full” human interactions.

**無縁社会 (*muen shakai*):  
“a “relationless society”  
in which the ties that bind  
have come undone”**

At the same time, I aim to develop my current research on the related subject of intercultural ethics and governance of AI, robots, and other data-driven technologies, examining how differing and dynamic values and ethical approaches within and between nations can be expressed in the global governance and regulation of these rapidly changing technologies.

*The Fondation France-Japon de l'EHESS warmly thanks James Wright for accepting to answer to this interview.*

### Further information

▶ **James Wright's profile page on FFJ website**

Access: [http://ffj.ehess.fr/james\\_wright.html](http://ffj.ehess.fr/james_wright.html)

▶ **INNOVCARE - Care-led innovation: The case of elderly care in France and Japan**

Access: <https://innovcare.hypotheses.org/>

▶ **Discussion Paper**

Comparing the Development and Commercialization of Care Robots in the European Union and Japan

Access: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/FFJ/hal-02527652>

▶ **Latest report**

Wright, J., Leslie, D., Raab, C., Kitagawa, F., Ostmann, F., and M. Briggs. PATH-AI Interim Report. The Alan Turing Institute.

Access: [https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/path\\_ai\\_report\\_final\\_version.pdf](https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/path_ai_report_final_version.pdf)

▶ **Forthcoming book**

Wright, J. *Robots Won't Save Japan: An Ethnography of Eldercare Automation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022.

