Francesca Rossi

IBM AI Ethics Global Leader and Distinguished Research Staff Member at the IBM T.J. Watson Research Lab

At the height of a 22-year academic career, Francesca Rossi took a leave of absence from her tenured full professorship in computer science at the University of Padua in Italy to explore new ways of thinking. Rather than seeking evidence to reinforce what she already knew, Francesca spent a year at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute, where she was challenged by her distinguished counterparts in the arts and humanities.

"My interactions at the Radcliffe Institute motivated my thinking about ethical questions in artificial intelligence, my area of research," Francesca says. "Collaborating with experts from outside of my core discipline helped me recognize the need to consider both the humanistic and technological perspectives when designing AI systems."

Francesca's perspective encompasses the broader world of AI ethics across industries, academia and society. "Ensuring that AI systems complement humanity in beneficial ways has been the focus of my role since I joined IBM after Radcliffe," she says. Her scholarly grounding in computer science, combined with her experience collaborating across disciplines, makes her unique in the technology industry—positioning her to help drive IBM's leadership in the development and responsible stewardship of technology.

Francesca's credibility as a technical expert and groundbreaking thinker has enabled her to build external partnerships and propel IBM into its leadership position in the global AI ethics conversation. She formed IBM's internal AI Ethics Board, which she now co-chairs with IBM's Chief Privacy Officer. Committed to collaboration and inclusivity, the Board has helped IBM units focused on research, business and policies to reach consensus on critical AI ethics issues.

Balancing Innovation and Ethics

Francesca also spearheaded IBM's efforts as a founding member of the Partnership in AI, a global community of more than 100 entities from the enterprise, nonprofit and academic sectors dedicated to defining and sharing best practices for beneficial AI. She strongly believes that innovation can coexist with AI ethics guidelines, such as those related to privacy, fairness and transparency.

"Building an ecosystem of public trust in technology is a big part of my job," Francesca says. "To do that, we must first define the properties of an ethical AI system. Our clients want to know if they can trust IBM to deliver AI systems that respect privacy and are fair, transparent, robust and explainable. And consumers—the customers of our clients—want similar assurances. It is important for both groups to be aware of IBM's multidimensional and very concrete approach to AI ethics, which distinguishes us from other companies."

Francesca remains a curious and productive scholar. She recently chaired the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, the world's largest general AI conference, which convened more than 4,000 scientists.

At home in suburban New York, Francesca relaxes by painting portraits. She also enjoys traveling to Italy to

spend time with her parents.

"Almost everything we do, including the ways all of us work, will be changed in some way by AI," she notes. "That is why it is critically important for us to establish and maintain ethical frameworks through which we can examine and anticipate the consequences of our choices."

"If we focus on our humanity as we create our technologies, our potential is unlimited," she continues, "because the ultimate goal is not to improve AI, but to improve us as human beings through the advancement of AI."

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