

May 24, 2023

Meredith Veit (Technology & Human Rights Researcher)
Gayatri Khandhadai (Head of Technology and Human Rights)
Business & Human Rights Resource Centre
The Foundry, 17 Oval Way
London, SE11 5RR

Dear Ms. Veit and Ms. Khandhadai:

Thank you for inviting Palantir Technologies (“Palantir”) to respond to the human rights concerns raised in the referenced articles [1]. As we have with previous requests from Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, we welcome opportunities to provide additional transparency into Palantir’s approach to integrating ethics and fundamental rights protections into our product development and deployment efforts, as well as our business practices.

The specific allegations “that Palantir is not adequately mitigating salient human rights risks when developing new generative artificial intelligence (AI) based products, particularly in reference to the potential harms that can arise in conflict afflicted areas” unfortunately reflect shallow and poorly researched assessments in these articles. Other than a cursory viewing of Palantir’s Artificial Intelligence Platform for Defense demo video [2], the authors appear to have drawn sweeping conclusions about the intent and implications of nuanced considerations embedded in the video’s content. This limited approach to reporting might be more excusable were the video the sole public artifact shared by the company touching on issues of concern raised by the authors. However, it is neither the case that the video stands as Palantir’s only reflection on AI ethics (both broadly and in the military context) nor that supporting material are difficult to discover.

To the contrary, Palantir has proactively offered extensive publicly available (i.e., prominently placed on our official blog and website) details documenting our position on ethical and humanitarian considerations in the development and use of artificial intelligence technologies.

As an overarching framework, Palantir has published our Approach to AI Ethics [3] and provided a detailed accounting of the considerations that differentiate our applied or operational orientation towards AI ethics from what we argue are more performative and less meaningful approaches adopted by other institutions [4]. Both predate the Vice and Barron’s articles. Our stated ethics principles explicitly include tenets of “Acknowleg[ing] technology’s limits,” rejecting unbridled technological solutionism tendencies (i.e., “Don’t solve problems that shouldn’t be solved.”), “Keep[ing] AI responsible, accountable, and oriented towards humans,” and “Ensuring technical, governance, and cultural awareness in data and technology applications.”

We have gone into depth in further articulating how these principles are applied in practice. In one public blog post (also predating the Vice and Barron’s articles), for example, we outline in detail the

Palantir Foundry Platform’s model management capabilities and the ways that these tools incorporate the principles of responsible artificial intelligence deployment [5]. In another post, we provide detailed case studies demonstrating how Palantir Foundry capabilities support and enable “AI safety, reliability, explainability, and governance” as a reflection of “Palantir’s broader commitment to building technologies that enable truly effective and ethically responsible outcomes in the most important settings, from civil government and defense, to health and commercial.” [6]

Beyond providing this documentation and explication of our direct work, we have also sought to translate our experiences into suggestions for public policy development, including advocating for thoughtful approaches to AI regulation [7]. Specifically our regulatory suggestions have promoted critical humanitarian focused themes such as the importance of, “Orienting AI around human concerns and outcomes [which] often means that the best technology solutions augment rather than replace human intelligence” and the belief that “AI innovation is not only compatible with Security, Privacy, Data Protection, and Other Fundamental Rights interests, but is also most effective when it supports rights-protective outcomes.”

As we state in our published Approach to AI Ethics:

We assert an ethics of technology that applies to the full contexts of its use. These contexts each implicate their own situated set of domain-specific demands, functional expectations, and ethical obligations. This framing compels us to put AI in its appropriate place: as a tool among other tools of varying sophistication and inexorably embedded in a world of tangible actions and consequences.

The implications of this assertion are especially evidenced in our extensive engagement on questions surrounding the use of AI in military applications. In one blog post, we outline considerations undergirding our belief that “providers of technology involved in non-lethal and especially lethal use of force bear a responsibility to understand and confront the relevant ethical concerns and considerations surrounding the application of their products” and that “[t]his responsibility becomes all the more important the deeper technology becomes embedded in some of the most consequential decision-making processes.” [8]

In a written testimony submitted to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Palantir’s CTO Shyam Sankar emphasized that, “[e]ffective AI [inclusive of new and emerging generative artificial intelligence based products] should enable responsible warfighting that reinforces principles of national law, military doctrine, and international humanitarian law to help ensure that our defense forces never lose sight of the values we are fighting to preserve.” [9]

In my own appearance before the U.K. House of Lords AI in Weapons Systems Committee [10] and in an accompanying written submission [11], I articulated the case for AI tools to be made to “uphold the moral traditions and imperatives that make our societies worth defending... [that] they should, for example, help personnel minimise civilian harm and uphold obligations under International Humanitarian Law (“IHL”), and ensure that life and death decisions are being made by appropriate, accountable actors.”

With this abundance of readily discoverable public content (much of which Palantir has prominently placed on its website and predates both the Vice and Barron's pieces), we find it unfortunate that authors at Vice and Barron's neither conducted basic journalistic due diligence to examine these sources nor (more alarmingly) reached out to Palantir to provide us with an opportunity to comment or direct them to this material.

We hope that this provides clarity to the questions raised by this inquiry as much as it provides insight into the substantive convictions and material efforts we invest into addressing the fundamental rights implications of all our work, inclusive of our development and deployment of advanced technologies for use by defense agencies.

Sincerely,

Courtney Bowman
Global Director of Privacy and Civil Liberties, Palantir Technologies

Endnotes:

- [1] "Palantir Demos AI to Fight Wars But Says It Will Be Totally Ethical Don't Worry About It," 26 April 2023, VICE: https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjvb4x/palantir-demos-ai-to-fight-wars-but-says-it-will-be-totally-ethical-dont-worry-about-it?mc_cid=dc465b7dad&mc_eid=ac7b07e910 [vice.com]; "Palantir Plans AI Platform for Military and Commercial Customers," 10 April 2023, Barron's: <https://www.barrons.com/articles/palantir-ai-platform-military-use-f94064ad> [barrons.com]
- [2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEM5qz_HOU
- [3] <https://www.palantir.com/pcl/palantir-ai-ethics/>
- [4] Courtney Bowman (2023), "The Efficacy and Ethics of AI Must Move Beyond the Performative to the Operational," *Palantir Blog*, <https://bit.ly/3nQi9VE>.
- [5] Courtney Bowman, Arnav Jagasia, Angela McNeal, and Nick Weatherburn (2023), "Enabling Responsible AI in Palantir Foundry," <https://bit.ly/3zBPo1E>.
- [6] Michael Adams and Dr. Indra Joshi (2023), "Palantir Foundry for AI Governance", <https://bit.ly/3BvbR1c>.
- [7] <https://www.palantir.com/pcl/palantir-ai-policy-contributions/>
- [8] Courtney Bowman and Peter Austin (2023), "AI, Automation, and the Ethics of Modern Warfare," *Palantir Blog*, <https://bit.ly/3nXzIJ0>.
- [9] https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/U.S.%20Senate%20-%20Written%20Testimony%20-%20Shyam%20Sankar_FINAL.pdf
- [10] <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/18055/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>
- [11] https://www.palantir.com/assets/xrfr7uokpv1b/T6XBvRNbtgOysf4XuYqpH/1ba005ae5b469eb47ea484ad34dadcea/Palantir_Submission_to_the_HL_AI_in_Weapons_Systems_Committee.pdf