

Secure Community Transformers: Private Pooled Data for LLMs

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Abstract

ChatGPT and other large language models (LLM) interfaces offer powerful and flexible capabilities in tasks including question-answering and chat-based support. These models can already access global context, through web searches and public data, or personal context, through augmentation with private data and local storage. However, securely addressing community-level challenges and collective action problems necessitates unique privacy, security, and custodianship solutions that safely bring together data from multiple parties and stakeholders. This paper presents a method that enables communities to securely aggregate data for LLM-based question-answering, aimed at extracting valuable local insights and customizing model responses to meet community-specific requirements while being inherently auditable. To this end, we leverage a combination of traditional privacy transformations, LLM-enabled privacy transformations, trusted execution environments, custodial control of data, and consent-based privacy choices, to maximize community data security while maintaining the flexibility required for community question-answering. This innovative method facilitates collaborative problem-solving using shared community data.

1 Introduction

The rapid proliferation of large language models such as GPT-3.5, GPT-4 [42], and LLaMA [55] as well as their consumer-facing interfaces like ChatGPT have captured our collective imagination. The flexibility and versatility of these technologies make them well-suited to perform a variety of tasks involving human interaction. Although these models are trained on a massive range of data sources across the web, this data is not up to date. The advent of knowledge retrieval augmentation (such as WebGPT [39] or RAG [33]), promises to allow these models to become question-answer tools for

specific information available on the public internet. These models could also become powerful consumer tools if they are augmented with personal data (health, financial, and family information), such as demonstrated by the Microsoft 365 Copilot. However, public data is limited and many key insights can only be garnered by aggregating and searching through private community data.

The power of community data sharing is increasingly being recognized as a vital component in tackling complex societal challenges and enhancing overall well-being. This has led to the emergence of innovative data governance models, such as data cooperatives [21], which promote the idea that individuals can collectively control and benefit from their data. The critical role of data in the new economy underscores the importance of users taking collective control of their data to reap the rewards of this valuable resource [46]. A human-centered approach to data architecture, as described in "Trusted Data" [22], seeks to address data privacy, security, ownership, and trust by enabling insights to be extracted without revealing the underlying data. This approach, combined with breaking down the data silos of big tech monopolies, has the potential to democratize data sharing for community well-being [57].

There has been a great deal of research in the social sciences about what a human community is [5, 48], but we draw on a broad definition where a community is a group of people with shared relationships and the possibility or will to create shared institutional structures (which are needed to deploy our proposed system). These communities could comprise physically co-located individuals, physically distributed groups with a common enterprise (such as businesses), or groups of individuals with shared challenges (such as minority groups facing shared challenges or groups with rare diseases). In each of these contexts, there is value to the unique insights that can be harnessed through the aggregation and analysis of local data using LLM-based question-answering while preserving privacy.

For instance, physical communities could use this method to share data on traffic, experiences with local businesses, or

crime rates to help with collective coordination and planning. This information could be used to design better urban environments, allocate city resources more efficiently, or develop more effective community programs. Businesses could benefit from this approach to securely aggregate data across business units or partner companies to help design strategic goals, draw from past client experiences or co-work on compatible application programming interfaces. Minority communities could share experiences and personal insights to allow for better chat-based mental health support systems or to extract insights that allow for better program development to address the real needs of the community. The proposed method is flexible enough to meet the specific data-sharing needs of various communities while maintaining data security and privacy. In general, the goal is not only to enable community data to be aggregated for analysis but also to align the results of the LLM with the interests and experiences of the community.

As the field of engineering LLMs to address user needs progresses rapidly, we pinpoint three primary state-of-the-art strategies to build models that cater to the needs of communities: (1) Prompt engineering system messages that are tailored to the community; (2) Fine-tuning using reinforcement learning from human feedback (RLHF [43]) using members of a community to answer questions in a way that better suits the needs of the community; (3) Augmenting responses with data to provide relevant experiential and contextual answers by drawing information from real community data and personal stories. Each of these approaches draws on community input and deliberation to optimally address the needs of the community. We omit a broader discussion of fine-tuning for specific tasks, as we wish for these models to stay as general purposes and flexible as possible. While the use of RLHF using community feedback is powerful, we leave this as future work as it would require additional costly separate infrastructure and significant hands-on work by members of a community to provide human feedback for training. Further, while designing a robust and equitable system prompt that suits the needs of a community is essential, we take this as a given for the rest of the body of this work, reserving examination of deliberative system prompt selection for the discussion. Instead, we will focus on approach (3), which allows the secure use of community data without significant additional investment to augment model responses.

To do this, this work presents the following novel contributions to the literature:

- A system architecture for securely sharing community data to an LLM for question answering.
- A brief survey of privacy-enabled tools for community question answering.
- An analysis of the privacy-preserving use cases on natural language text by large language models.

- A proposal for experiments in communities to test the effectiveness of the proposed system.
- An in-development prototype implementation of the system.

2 System architecture

The system is designed based on the core principles that data and compute should be hosted and controlled locally where possible, that all data should be self-sovereign and provided with consent, and that privacy (both from the outside world and within the community) should be controllable and guaranteed to the strongest possible level.

To allow individuals in the community to contribute data and then query aggregated data resources at a later date, shared resources in the community should be used to establish a server to deploy a trusted execution environment (TEE) and an encrypted database, which will be used to protect community data. These execution environments will externalize a public encryption key used to encrypt the flow of user data and at any point, the community may choose to dissolve the infrastructure deleting all shared data. The community may decide to allow a ‘backdoor’ through which the TEE can delete or extract raw data. To ensure that this mechanism is used responsibly, and to avoid potential security breaches, the community may designate a committee or a board to vote on approving any use of the ‘backdoor’. This can be handled by a threshold signing protocol [29], which requires a majority of voters to approve such action.

To summarize, the system leverages six key privacy and security elements:

1. A TEE is used to execute the custodial operations of the data and queries.
2. Data remains encrypted once it has left the hands of an individual using the public encryption key provided by the TEE. Only the TEE, which cannot be directly accessed by any user of the server (not even with root access), ever sees the corresponding decryption key.
3. Private data has a de-identification step applied to it (using LLMs or traditional methods).
4. Non-private and de-identified data are made available to the LLM through secure information-retrieval in a key-controlled database.
5. User queries and prompts (with data) are encrypted and sent to the TEE.
6. (Optional) All data is kept local through the execution of the LLM on the TEE (computational limits allowing, see [subsection 2.3](#)).

In this system, three sets of data are processed. The first is a user query to the system, X , which will contain a prompt X_{prompt} and optionally data, X_{data} . This user data may take a variety of forms and it may either interact with existing data or be placed directly into a text-based query. This user query may require data from the community to answer. The community data is broken into two types, private community data with sensitive information, $C^{private}$, and C^{open} which only contains data that anyone in the community can access. It is important to note here that C^{open} should still not be provided to the public internet, only that it is available to the full community without restraint. For example, C^{open} may be proprietary enterprise data or shared community records. We denote the community data as a pool, where the pooled data is made up of i individual records, $C_i^{private}$, each of which may require specific operations to ensure privacy. The items in the pooled data will be uploaded asynchronously over time, resulting in a constantly updating pool of community data, C .

The TEE is a secure area in a processor that guarantees the confidentiality and integrity of the code and data executed within it. When combined with access control mechanisms, a TEE can provide a highly secure solution for protecting data uploaded and stored in a database. When a TEE is initialized, it generates a public-private key pair. When community members upload their data, they can securely encrypt it using the public key of the TEE, pk , before uploading it to the database via the TEE, and only the TEE, which holds the private key, can decrypt the data. If only the TEE has access to a set of tables within the database, then individual records need not be encrypted (as the whole database is) allowing for an efficient search of records to augment responses. More importantly, loading complete tables into the enclave prevents deanonymization attacks associated with observing memory access patterns. For example, encrypted data in which each item is encrypted separately would still leak how often a specific item is accessed, which under certain circumstances could have devastating results. Larger tables that do not fit in the enclave’s memory can leverage an Oblivious RAM (ORAM) scheme [25], but we leave this for future work.

Similarly to the community data upload process, a user can encrypt their prompt, X^{prompt} , and associated data, X^{data} , for upload to the TEE. While steps are taken throughout the process to prevent the leaking of community data, this becomes increasingly hard to ensure if outsiders are able to query the TEE API. Many solutions exist for this challenge, from simple user account management to special identity control or cryptographic wallet signing. These approaches can help to prevent attacks via information leakage through repeated queries (which has been shown to be a threat in many privacy contexts [41]) and distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on limited local compute resources.

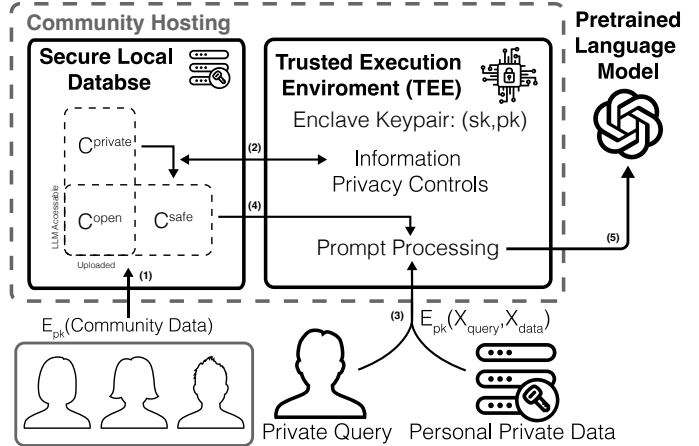


Figure 1: A diagram of how private queries can be combined with personal data to allow for large language model examination of shared community data that has been privacy-preserved. (1) Community data is encrypted at upload time into a secure database using the trusted execution environment’s (TEE) public key (pk). (2) The securely uploaded private data is transformed into a privacy-persevered intermediate representation that can be inspected and audited. (3) Private user queries can be sent to the TEE where the prompt engine can combine queries with community data using information retrieval (4) to send to a pre-trained language model hosted externally via API or within local hosting for security enhancements (computational resources permitting).

2.1 LLM querying

While a large literature exists around fine-tuning models for specific tasks, recent work has focused on the role of augmenting LLMs using retrieval from external knowledge sources. Owing to their remarkable capabilities and pre-training on large corpora, LLMs are extremely powerful zero-shot and few-shot learners [4, 8, 42, 53]. However, their offline training approach results in a lack of up-to-date information. Work on retrieval-augmented language models allowed LLMs to draw on external knowledge [20, 24, 33, 60]. These augmented models can draw on up-to-date information from the web through search engines [6, 32, 39], code repositories [44, 59, 61], or private documents [2, 23, 26].

These retrieval models come in a variety of forms from document-search-based approaches [2, 27, 54] to more sophisticated approaches such as iterative prompts revising [45]. While many of these approaches use sophisticated approaches to augment the LLM, recent work has found success in simply prepending the retrieval results to the LLM query [49, 51]. These latter approaches are extremely simple to operate and use traditional, efficient, and reproducible information retrieval systems such as Pyserini [35]. The simplicity of these approaches and their ability to efficiently run on a TEE makes them particularly well suited for our proposal.

Building on the work in RALM [49], where a user creates a query, the TEE information reveal system performs a search that retrieves one or more documents or document summaries from the community corpus C , and conditions the above LLM predictions on these documents by concatenating the retrieved documents within the LLMs input prior to the query prompt.

2.2 Information privacy controls

While much of the secure infrastructure proposed here is focused on keeping data safely within the community, care must be taken in how data is shared between community members. Where community members declare data open to the community, C^{open} , no additional work needs to be done, and the data can be indexed and searched directly by the information reveal system. For sensitive data that is uploaded, $C^{private}$, a privacy-preserving operation must be performed on the data to produce new data artifacts C^{safe} . In this discussion, we categorize data at the community level into two types: quantitative data and natural language data.

2.2.1 Privacy preservation in natural language

Over the last several years, a variety of approaches have been proposed to leverage deep learning to create privacy-preserving text representations and altered textual data to protect against identification or private attribute inferences [10, 15–17, 34, 38] with applications in protecting data from emails [14] to medical notes [1, 13].

Prior works use a variety of approaches from differential privacy in training to an adversarial approach to privacy [11]. We anticipate that with the increased capabilities of new models such as GPT-4 [42] even more effective approaches will emerge to provide privacy while still outputting intermediate representations after the privacy-preserving step. In Figure 2 we demonstrate an example of using powerful LLM models to perform the privacy-preserving step.

Given to the recent release of GPT-4’s release, these approaches are still largely untested. During testing, we found the GPT-3.5 endpoint with the same system message was systematically unable to fully privacy preserve the text (e.g., leaving in the friend’s name in the prompt of Figure 2). Protecting privacy, in this case, is particularly challenging if an actor has contextual knowledge about the community and its members. In such cases even deidentified data could be de-anonymized [40, 47]. Future work is needed to understand under what conditions this model can protect privacy.

While the privacy-preserving quality of this proposed approach is not yet fully studied, the approach has two important advantages. First, it uses the existing technology stack to prompt the LLM locally or via the API, reducing the software overhead. Second, it creates an intermediate text representation that *should* be de-identified. In cases where the community members believe data is sensitive enough to warrant

checking, the TEE can be built to return the individual records to the user after de-identification. This would allow the user to confirm that their information has been scrubbed and choose to delete it if not thus providing auditable privacy.

2.2.2 Privacy transformations on quantitative data

While many valuable insights are only available through the analysis of natural language text, there is also a wide array of community questions that can be addressed purely through, or in combination with, quantitative data. Various related projects have used community data to help members make better decisions [9, 58] including specific interfaces for contexts such as migration choices [36] or urban health inequalities [12].

In many cases, these data-based support systems use publicly available data provided by governments or institutions. Governments around the world release a variety of statistics and raw data that is useful in decision-making. This data can include zoning data for urban planning, housing statistics for understanding the local real estate market, healthcare outcomes for various communities and demographics to optimize public health services, and educational performance data to guide policies and resource allocation in the education sector.

In cases where governments cannot release raw records due to privacy concerns, many have attempted to do so with privacy-enabling technologies, such as differential privacy in US census results [19] and the Canadian Open Data initiative, which employs data anonymization techniques to protect individual identities while providing valuable datasets for public use.

Quantitative data does not need to just come from governments. Individuals can extract valuable insights from privately sharing personal quantitative data [52]. For example, citizen science tasks often involve individuals sharing data on local environmental conditions, such as air quality, water quality, or biodiversity, to support scientific research and conservation efforts [18]. Another example is personal health tracking, where individuals contribute anonymized health data, like steps walked, sleep patterns, or heart rate, to better understand population-level trends and improve public health interventions. These shared contributions help build a richer understanding of the community and its needs while respecting individual privacy. Furthering this approach, the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) encourages the use of privacy-preserving techniques like k-anonymization [50] and pseudonymization when sharing personal data.

2.3 Local LLM Inference

Despite the previously mentioned design elements ensuring secure data uploading, limited access, and privacy preservation, there remains a critical security aspect to address. At

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| <p>SYSTEM</p> <p>You are a privacy control bot. Your job is to take natural language stories presented by users and remove all identifying information from the text. You will output a response that is also in natural language, preserving the style, tone, and overarching message of the text, but with all names, personal details, or identifying attributes of anyone mentioned removed.</p> | <p>USER</p> <p>Ever since Sally died, my mental health has been in the toilet. I really hit a dark place with my depression and was drinking 10 pints at the Commonwealth almost every night, especially on Fridays after I finished work. Bob would sometimes drink with me, and that would help, but I was still not in a great place. It wasn't until I went to the MyHealth Support Clinic. They really helped me work through everything I was facing. It isn't listed anywhere online, but those folks at the clinic are specialists at dealing with exactly these kinds of issues. I cannot recommend them highly enough. - Jess</p> |
| | <p>ASSISTANT</p> <p>Ever since a dear friend passed away, my mental health has been in a downward spiral. I really hit a dark place with my depression and found myself consuming an excessive amount of alcohol at a local bar almost every night, particularly on Fridays after finishing work. A close acquaintance would sometimes join me, providing some support, but I was still not in a great place. It wasn't until I visited a particular support clinic that I started to find the help I needed. Although not widely known, the professionals at this clinic specialize in dealing with these types of issues. I cannot recommend their services enough.</p> |

Figure 2: An example of using GPT-4 with a focused system prompt to convert the identifiable text into a deidentified text that still contains the essential information. All identifying names have been removed (including the name of the clinic which may have been useful information) but threats involving an actor with knowledge of the relevant context remain.

present, the largest and most powerful language models, such as GPT-4, are accessible only through an API. This means that uploading sensitive data necessitates sending community data to an external service, posing challenges in terms of privacy, security, and data compliance, particularly when sensitive records must be stored locally (as required by GDPR and CCPA).

One potential solution is to host these LLM tools locally. Considerable efforts are being made to enable smaller versions of these models (such as LLaMA-7B or Alpaca) to run efficiently on local devices. Projects like `llama.cpp`¹ aim to port open models to operate on local consumer-level Unix-based hardware. Additionally, approaches may draw from the principles of TinyML to enable models to run on edge computing [3]. If inference efficiency improvements are substantial enough, these models could potentially operate entirely within the TEE, significantly enhancing security. However, as things currently stand, high-speed and low-memory methods for running LLMs do not achieve the same level of flexibility and robust performance as their large server-hosted counterparts.

Even in situations where full chat-based LLM answering cannot be performed locally, we may prioritize the privacy aspect of inference. This is crucial since enabling local privacy controls for all data ensures that no private data ever leaves community servers. To this end, smaller LLMs running locally might be sufficient for providing privacy controls. If these are unavailable, the vast array of traditional literature on NLP-based privacy controls, as outlined in [subsubsection 2.2.1](#), is appropriate for running either directly in the TEE or through locally hosted compute services, such as external GPUs or community compute services.

While much of the system is designed for low-cost local deployment to maximize usability for small communities, larger communities (such as major corporations) might prioritize privacy and security over cost. In these instances, the threat model of the LLM may involve sending any data to an external company server, making the use of within-company

cloud computing a sensible and secure alternative. In such cases, open-source LLMs are highly suitable for running on company servers and can even be further fine-tuned to align with company values, as demonstrated in RLHF [43].

3 Experiments with secure community transformers

In order to assess the real-world effectiveness of these tools for communities, we are initiating the design of field experiments that utilize the tool to evaluate its utility and safety. The ultimate objective is to implement the model end-to-end within a specific community, creating tools that address key concerns. For demonstration and evaluation, we concentrate on a specific application relevant to numerous communities: mental health support. The primary task involves using the LLM to function as a mental health support chatbot [31], drawing from existing community experiences to customize responses to a community's unique concerns. For instance, an LGBTQ support organization could gather community experiences to develop a support bot tailored to address the challenges faced by other community members.

To accomplish this goal, the task can be divided into a series of smaller evaluation tasks. The key hypotheses to test are: (H1) LLMs can successfully deidentify personal experiences, and (H2) Enhancing mental health chatbots with personal stories can improve their utility for communities that are underrepresented in the LLM training data.

Before conducting a full user study to evaluate these approaches, we will rely on two different datasets to test the concepts. The first dataset is from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which contains Personal Stories that often include identifying information (given with consent) or pseudonymous information. This data is processed through the privacy-preserving LLM to identify areas where the models struggle to remove sensitive information. The second dataset is a public comment thread from the `r/AskReddit` subreddit, where

¹<https://github.com/ggerganov/llama.cpp>

users were asked, “As a mental health worker or someone affected by mental health issues, what is one thing you would want to say to educate people about mental health and to lessen the stigma and shame surrounding it?” This thread has 11.2 thousand comments, and we focus on the root comments containing users’ personal stories. For quality control, we select the top 1000 comments with user stories and input them into our information retrieval system for use in the LLM chat interfaces. This proof of concept enables us to examine how often community answers are referenced (through information retrieval success rates) and assess the usefulness of the responses in generating robust results (through A/B testing with and without retrieval augmentation).

The final experiment aims to determine how effectively these LLM interfaces with information retrieval can utilize non-textual data. A key example, within the context of the aforementioned application, is incorporating local mental health statistics.

4 Discussion

While the proposed system design offers protection against several threat models, it is unable to guard against others. The following discussion will elaborate on the system’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of security and compliance, as well as explore the potential socio-technical challenges and the influence of system prompts on long-term behaviors.

One of the primary concerns with the system design is the possibility of bad data insertion, whereby malicious or incorrect data may be introduced into the system. This issue is particularly concerning when community members intentionally or inadvertently introduce false or destructive content into the model. Such content can significantly reduce the system’s performance, compromise its accuracy, and potentially harm other members of the community. As a result, the effectiveness and reliability of the system can be severely undermined. To mitigate this risk, it is essential to implement robust data validation and moderation mechanisms to detect and filter out malicious or erroneous inputs. This may involve incorporating automated content analysis, user reputation systems, and manual moderation processes to ensure that the data fed into the system is accurate, reliable, and beneficial to the community as a whole. Additionally, fostering a culture of trust, responsibility, and accountability within the community can help minimize the likelihood of bad data insertion and encourage members to contribute positively to the system’s success.

In terms of compliance, the system design adheres to the GDPR, CCPA, and the proposed EU AI Act [30]. However, the evolving nature of these regulatory frameworks leaves a significant number of legal questions unanswered. It does, however, maintain the right to be forgotten, as community members give consent for data to be used, and can revoke that consent by removing the data (and any of its privacy

preserving transformations) from the community data pool.

Socio-technical challenges may arise from this system design, particularly in terms of reinforcing community groupthink and polarization [28]. By exclusively using data from a specific community, the system may inadvertently amplify existing biases, leading to further polarization within and between communities. The risk of driving echo chambers further apart and intensifying divisions between communities should not be overlooked. To address these challenges, it is crucial to develop strategies that encourage diverse perspectives, promote constructive dialogue, and counteract the potential for negative consequences resulting from the system’s design. Indeed, the EU AI Act is deeply concerned about the role of subliminal persuasion from models, and it is still unclear where liability or risks emerge when acting on the outputs from these models.

An essential aspect to consider regarding the long-term impact of these systems on communities is the choice of system prompts. The prompts can wield a considerable influence on the model’s behavior, dictating what it will and will not do. Ensuring that system prompts encourage positive behavior and productive interactions is crucial for the successful implementation and adoption of these tools within communities. This may involve designing prompts that foster empathy, understanding, and open-mindedness, as well as incorporating feedback from diverse stakeholders to ensure a broad range of perspectives is represented. Moreover, it is important to regularly evaluate and adjust the prompts to optimize the system’s performance and adapt to the evolving needs and dynamics of the communities it serves.

Finally, it’s important to turn our attention to the use of TEEs as a security control mechanism within the system design. TEEs provide additional layers of security by safeguarding the executed code, runtime state, and memory during operation. In situations where lower security controls are deemed sufficient, TEEs can be entirely removed and replaced with an unsecured runtime on a cloud provider or local server, offering advantages in speed, auditability, and flexibility. Conversely, if a community is concerned about centralized control of data management and computation, they could opt for a system that distributes the data across a network of TEEs (e.g., as in the case with Secret Network², a privacy-preserving Blockchain). Similarly, as TEEs are known to be susceptible to potential side-channel attacks [7, 56], a community could leverage secure multiparty computation (MPC) to manage the system [37, 62]. MPC distributes the control and processing of data across multiple parties, ensuring no single entity has complete control over the information. However, this approach comes with trade-offs, as it may significantly reduce system speed and usability. It also requires assuming that the different parties do not collude — an assumption that may be difficult to make in practice. Ultimately, the choice of se-

²<http://docs.scart.network/>

curity mechanisms should be tailored to the specific needs and concerns of each community, balancing the desired level of privacy and protection with the trade-offs in performance and ease of use. By carefully considering these factors, communities can implement a system that offers robust security while maintaining functionality and accessibility for all its members.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented a novel method for securely aggregating data from multiple parties and stakeholders within a community, enabling the utilization of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT for question-answering tasks that address community-level challenges and collective action problems. By incorporating a range of privacy and security measures, such as traditional privacy transformations, LLM-enabled privacy transformations, trusted execution environments, custodial control of data, and consent-based privacy choices, the proposed system maximizes community data security while offering a flexible tool for community-specific insights and tailored model responses.

The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate application of LLMs in question-answering tasks, as it demonstrates the potential for harnessing the power of these models in a secure and privacy-preserving manner to address a wide array of community-oriented problems. Furthermore, the methods presented in this paper can serve as a foundation for future research, exploring novel ways to enhance data security, privacy, and usability in LLM applications while fostering collaborative problem-solving using shared community data.

As LLMs continue to advance and gain prominence, it is essential to develop robust, secure, and privacy-preserving mechanisms that cater to the unique needs of various communities. By bridging the gap between individual and global contexts, this research contributes to the ongoing efforts to make LLMs an invaluable tool for addressing the complex, diverse, and dynamic challenges faced by communities worldwide.

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