



Future of Work

Conundrum with Artificial Intelligence and Ethics

Regenerative Futures, Inc

Thought Leadership Compendium.



Importance of Ethics in a Virreal World

Digital tools - increasingly sophisticated AI applications, interoperable edge computing and Internet of Things (IOT) devices, autonomous technologies - underpin the functioning of cities and critical infrastructure today and will play a key role in developing resilient solutions for tomorrow's crises. Yet these developments also give rise to new challenges for states trying to manage the existing physical world and this rapidly expanding digital domain. Large and complex issues like commercialized piracy, data-enabled anocracies, misinformation and disinformation, adverse use of frontier technologies are becoming mainstream¹. In this context, conversations around ethical use and deployment of frontier technologies – particularly artificial intelligence – have become mainstream, crossing from the domain of corporations into parliaments and multilateral institutions alike.

In 2022, the World Economic Forum² had laid down eight key risk zones, emanating from use and deployment of frontier technologies (as in graphic below).



Emphasis is now being placed significantly on not just use cases for AI across all economic and geopolitical endeavors, but on the consequences – unintended and purpose-driven – of such deployments, as articulated above.

¹ Please refer to our knowledge paper titled "Future of Work – Reimagining a New World Order", 2023.

² Source: Global Risks Report 2022; www.weforum.org

Private sector-led development of a powerful dual-use (both civilian and military) technology makes regulatory guardrails even more essential. However, commercial incentives and national security-driven “tech wars” may outstrip regulatory efforts to curb adverse societal and security outcomes.

The production of AI technologies is highly concentrated, in a singular, globally integrated supply chain that favors a few companies and countries. This creates significant supply-chain risks that may unfold over the coming decade. For example, export controls over early stages of the supply chain (including minerals), could raise overall costs and lead to persistent inflationary pressures. Restricted access to more complex inputs (such as semiconductors) could radically alter the trajectory of advanced technological deployment within a country. The extensive deployment of a small set of AI foundation models, including in finance and the public sector, or overreliance on a single cloud provider, could give rise to systemic cyber vulnerabilities, paralyzing critical infrastructure³.

This paper intends to concentrate on risk zone 5, namely the “surveillance state” with emphasis on “surveillance capitalism” and how guardrails being envisioned now are necessary, yet grossly insufficient endeavors.

Surveillance Capitalism

It is important to appreciate some time-tested and accepted norms as we dive into this mainstream reality. The holistic development of an individual is a multifaceted process that encompasses the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of human life. The integration of ethical and human values is a crucial factor in this development process. Ethics play a crucial role in shaping the way people interact with each other and the world around them. In short, morals are the behaviors that society judges by. Ethics are the behaviors that your conscience judges. Each of us, depending on where and when we are born, draw a line and say, from there to here is good; from there to here is bad. And things start to get difficult closer to the line. The interplay between morals and ethics is pertinent to appreciate, starting with understanding the distinctions between the two.

Morals are the behaviors that society judges by. Ethics are the behaviors that your conscience judges.

Surveillance capitalism is broadly defined as “a new economic order that claims human experience as (a) free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales, (b) a parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to the new global architecture of behavioral modification⁴.”

³ Excerpt from the Global Risks Report 2024, by the World Economic Forum (page 51); www.weforum.org

⁴ Source: “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism – The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power”, Shoshana Zuboff; Hachette Book Group, 2020.

In economics terms, surveillance capitalism is the “subordination” of means of production to a complex and comprehensive means of “behavioral modification”.

The two definitions put together represent the underpinnings of almost all activities we see today across the socio-political, economic and commercial systems worldwide. We are all aware that our digital experiences capture significant amounts of behavioral data from us that are then utilized to customize those very experiences – thereby giving advertisers greater insights into target customers and monetization that in turn translates to immense revenues for platform providers (Google, Facebook, Baidu etc.) What we may not be aware is the amount of “surplus” behavioral data – voices, personalities, emotions, reactions, responses in social feeds available every second. Capturing such behavioral data has been significantly enhanced by intervening through nudges, suggestions, offers et al in a manner that permitted herding behavior of users toward profitable outcomes – and that is the digital world we live in today. Shoshana writes,

With this reorientation from knowledge to power, it is no longer enough to automate information flows about us; the goal is to automate us.

Our advances with machine learning, and now artificial intelligence have contributed to significant growth and borderless expansion of this capture and utilization of behavioral surplus, to an extent that traditional economics – production, consumption, distribution and exchange – is being replaced by a far more insidious form of capitalism where behavioral modification is being marketed as democratization of knowledge while the model in itself remains anti-inclusive, perfunctorily democratic, perhaps anti-social and significantly ambiguous with morality and ethics.

A Nebulous Future with Ethics

In 2017, the first deliberation on AI⁵ and its ethical implications was held, on lines similar to the 1975 Conference on recombinant DNA⁶. The 23 principles laid down the foundation for ethical institution of AI in various endeavors worldwide. However, the quest for building new digital revenues in a hyper-connected world resulted – unfortunately – in pushing commitments toward ethical implementation of AI technologies onto the backburner.

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- ⁵ The Asilomar Conference on Beneficial AI was a conference organized by the Future of Life Institute, held January 5–8, 2017, at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in California. More than 100 thought leaders and researchers in economics, law, ethics, and philosophy met at the conference, to address and formulate principles of beneficial AI. Its outcome was the creation of a set of guidelines for AI research – the 23 Asilomar AI Principles. Greater information on their activities, programs et al can be found at www.partnershiponai.org.
- ⁶ The Asilomar Conference on Recombinant DNA was an influential conference organized by Paul Berg, Maxine Singer, and colleagues to discuss the potential biohazards and regulation of biotechnology, held in February 1975 at a conference center at Asilomar State Beach, California. A group of about 140 professionals (primarily biologists, but also including lawyers and physicians) participated in the conference to draw up voluntary guidelines to ensure the safety of recombinant DNA technology (simply put, mixing DNA from different species to build new ones). The conference also placed scientific research more into the public domain, and can be seen as applying a version of the precautionary principle (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precautionary_principle).

Fast forward, today owing to the advent to generative AI, and consequences with general AI deployment, seen particularly in the manifestation of emergent risks around deep fakes, misinformation/ disinformation, geopolitical interferences and narratives permeated through AI - have all led to a reassessment of ethics with AI deployment, thereby debunking the long-held belief that self-governance is the best way to enable and enhance economic endeavors. It is fast being replaced by governments and multilateral stakeholders demanding accountability from large corporations that own data and leverage technologies for purely capitalist pursuits.

In this context, the world realized the need for international standards to govern AI, building on the Asilomar agreement. Led by UNESCO, 193 member nations embarked on formulating the first global normative instrument⁷ on the ethics of artificial intelligence in 2021 and that the OECD states that AI systems should be robust, secure and safe throughout their entire life cycle to function appropriately and avoid posing unreasonable risks to safety. However, they have been more advocative than action/ compliance oriented, given the complexity with combining a variegated set of standards across industries and countries (and particularly in nations where privacy protection laws are either onerous or poor).

Multilateral institutions like ASEAN and the EU are already building governance principles around ethical use of AI, alongside nations that are looking to institute their own versions of AI Governance rules and acts. How and what will these efforts translate to, and will they enable or disable globalization as it stands today?

In Conclusion

Would we be at the point where the world ends up pushing a “compliance economy” narrative, or would “self-governance” remain relevant any longer? We observe the dichotomy between private sector surveillance capitalism and government’s responsibility to ensure a level playing field. However, we may yet be missing the point that eventually, the consumer world seems not to really care about ethics and its interpretations, as much as institutions and some conscientious leaders seem to. After all, we are willingly and actively contributing to the world of surveillance capitalism and abhor any governance-centric interpretations to the proliferation of such technologies and the solutions being built on them. A case in point is the vociferous pretest to banning of TikTok in the USA.

I believe a time will soon come when we shall be left with little choices on whether to establish guardrails right now, or deal with an ambiguous, uncontrolled and non-human future where the species’ superiority will no longer hold.

⁷ Complete details of this instrument are available via link <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137>. It is a result of three standards bodies – International Telecoms Union (www.itu.int), International Electrotechnical Commission (www.iec.ch), and International Organization for Standards (www.iso.org) – that came together to form the World Standards Cooperation (www.worldstandardscooperation.org).

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We are one of the world's top 20 global sourcing advisory firms focused on strategic advisory, services sourcing and management consulting with specialization in practices that have a direct influence on the businesses and the future of work. Particular emphasis is placed on co-creation of solutions that enable (a) governments leverage the ICT sector to create sustainable sub-sectors incl. effective policy changes, attract FDI, enhance local entrepreneurship etc., (b) corporations adopt partnership-oriented strategies to aid expansions and growth, and (c) enable enterprises incorporate de-carbonization strategies into their businesses, initiate circular economy endeavors across their supply chains, and collaborate to build sustainable products / services.