It's time to discuss ethics in this AI era

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By Manish Bahl

WE have made more progress in artificial intelligence (AI) in the last three years than in the preceding three decades. AI is transforming from handy little applications that make our lives easier (from Alexa and Siri to Uber and Netflix) to something more powerful that is reshaping the commercial world as we know it.

The founding editor of *Wired*, Kevin Kelly, has likened AI to electricity – a cheap, reliable, industrial-grade, digitally smart entity that is the invisible force keeping everything running. He adds that it "will enliven inert objects, much as electricity did more than a century ago. Everything that we formerly electrified, we will now cognitise".

But our growing dependency on AI highlights serious issues of accountability and respect for human sensitivities. Here are some of the key social and ethical considerations to think about:

How do we know that an AI algorithm written by a human will not be biased? We have already seen how some machine-learning systems can fall foul of gender and other biases.

When it comes to the actions taken by an AI system, how do we decide what is ethical or not? For instance, a Netherlands developer had to defend himself – and his Twitterbot – when the police came to his door, inquiring about a death threat sent from his Twitter account.

Who is the guilty party when a self-driving car crashes? Can the owner of the vehicle file a claim against the manufacturer? What impact will this have on the insurance industry?

The commercial questions surrounding this subject are potentially endless, and certainly far too numerous to be answered individually.

Instead, we must frame them as questions of ethics. As AI tightens its grip over every part of our lives, the ethical challenges it brings will only become more pressing.

The problem is that ethics is a highly nebulous area. AI needs governance but right now, no central body is overseeing this task.

So how do you hang on to ethics when machines can do everything? While there are no universal rules that everyone can follow, there certainly are some important lessons that can help:

■ *Blend human values into your business objectives and innovation strategy*: Today's AI solutions reflect our business objectives rather than our human values. An essential task is to define what ethics means to your business model, and the resulting values that should be reflected in your annual report, company vision, marketing programmes, technology, business processes, and almost everything else you do.

Ethics is probably the last thing that innovators think about, when it should actually be an integral part of a firm's innovation strategy. The innovation team must ask themselves, before prototyping any new idea, what its social and societal implications are. Most of the time, if not always, the team should be certain that they are building "good" AI.

■ *It's time to get together with customers, partners and the competition*: It is absolutely vital to realise that ethics-related discussions are a must when it comes to exploring the grey areas of AI. Your industry must discuss the issue as one and come up with a mutually agreeable answer.

A good starting point would be to analyse how five of the world's largest tech companies are creating a standard of ethics to govern AI. An ideal scenario would be the replication of something similar within your own industry.

LISTEN TO YOUR CUSTOMERS

You should also actively encourage feedback from your customers so that you can be more in tune with what they are feeling.

One particularly interesting development is the Moral Machine Platform, which is designed to crowdsource expectations of how an autonomous vehicle should make moral decisions. Being serious about addressing ethical issues and incorporating the findings into the fabric of AI is crucial in this exciting new era.

■ *Make data ethics a key competitive differentiator*: Data is the foundation of any AI system. Therefore, ethics must become a key performance indicator for every employee who has a direct or indirect connection with customer data. This is all the more relevant for data scientists; while they wield an enormous amount of power, many fail to consider the ethical implications of their everyday actions, as there are no ethics guidelines set forth at most companies. Humans who are engaged in the design of AI solutions and algorithms must grasp the legal and business consequences of unethical data practices. Ultimately, a culture must be fostered in which employees feel comfortable with talking about ethics openly and frankly.

■ *Don't hide behind the regulations*: In legal terms, a lot of work is being done with AI right now. While it is natural that digital regulations will evolve at their own pace in different territories, they should not be considered as the only port of call when it comes to ethics. Someday, we hope, we will have legal and technical regulations, as well as audit mechanisms to measure the impact of unethical forms of AI. Until then, businesses must focus on self-regulation based on openness and accountability, with an ever-vigilant eye on the maintenance of human values.

If ethical considerations are overlooked, AI could have a catastrophic effect on companies' brands, reputations and finances. There is a clear requirement for more open and honest conversations about the ethical implications of AI and how we can best prepare ourselves for the exciting times ahead.

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