

Point: Programmers Must Make Algorithms More Ethical

Thesis: Companies can and must design algorithms ethically and meet societal expectations about values such as fairness, privacy, and transparency.

Talking Points

- Technology companies must take the lead in addressing the ethical implications of algorithms.
- Companies should combat bias in algorithm design through means such as audits, ethical training programs for employees, and diversity initiatives.
- Technologies with ethical implications must not be controlled solely by algorithms, and moral decisions must be left to humans.

Summary

Concerned about the ethical implications of many algorithms used in technology, some individuals and organizations argue that programmers and the companies that employ them are responsible for ensuring that their algorithms operate in an ethical manner and must take a proactive approach to identifying and mitigating ethical quandaries and biases. Darrell M. West, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for Technology Innovation, expressed that point in a 2018 report, writing that "technology companies increasingly are becoming digital sovereigns that set the rules of the road" and that "their coders make countless decisions that affect the way algorithms operate and make decisions." Due to the influential positions technology companies and programmers hold, West suggested that such companies and individuals must take the lead in regulating themselves, including by proactively developing ethical standards in partnership with ethics professionals. He further noted that his suggestions had broad support among the public, citing a Brookings survey that found that 67 percent of respondents preferred companies that had codes of ethics and 55 percent believed that companies should have ethicists on staff. West concluded that "individuals want companies to take meaningful action" to ensure their technologies operate in an ethical manner and that if companies do not take such action, the technology industry will likely face increased government oversight.

Additionally, some of those concerned about the ethics of algorithms assert that companies should specifically work to combat bias in algorithm design and implementation through

such means as audits, ethical training programs for employees, and diversity initiatives. Writing for the *Harvard Business Review* in 2019, James Manyika, Jake Silberg, and Brittany Presten of the consulting firm McKinsey & Company emphasized that point, recommending that companies develop processes to identify and address bias using both automated tools and human-led audits of algorithms' work. The consultants also recommended that companies address the biases of the humans creating those algorithms and increase the diversity of the workforce in technology, arguing that "a more diverse AI community would be better equipped to anticipate, review, and spot bias and engage communities affected."

Some of those concerned about ethical issues also argue that certain technologies must not be controlled solely by algorithms and must take human input into account, as humans are capable of making moral decisions that computers cannot. That point arose repeatedly in a 2016 study of industry experts conducted by the Pew Research Center and the Imagining the Internet Center of Elon University, which focused on assessing those professionals' positive and negative perceptions about algorithms. One recurring concern, as reported by the Pew Research Center, was that "humanity and human judgment are lost when data and predictive modeling become paramount." One anonymous survey respondent emphasized the importance of human oversight further, stating that systems "optimized for efficiency or profitability," as in the case of many algorithm-driven technologies, can "dehumanize the workforce." That survey respondent cautioned against excluding humans from such systems, asserting, "When you remove the humanity from a system where people are included, they become victims."

Ponder This

- The author has presented the fundamental positions for this perspective in the debate. Outline the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective.
- If asked to begin forming an argument for this position, what sources would you need to build your case? What fundamental information do you need? What opinion leaders in this debate would you look to in solidifying your argument?
- What are the weakest aspects of the position outlined by the author? How might those weaker arguments help you prepare a counter argument?

- What additional Talking Points could you add to support this position?

Bibliography

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