



DATA DECODER

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The technology of ethics: digitized and dangerous, caution advised

Our analytics are advancing by leaps and bounds, but are ethics keeping up?

Ethics used to be simpler to comprehend. But digital technology changed everything. Unethical acts can be as easy as a mere mouse click, victims are only notional and remote, and the impact can be magnified to a global scale in a heartbeat. Today, we see corporations rush to embrace the digital revolution, generating and harnessing mountains of data that continue to grow geometrically each year. At the same time, the power of analytics is advancing by leaps and bounds.

Not many of us are aware that these combined trends have already presented difficult paradoxes for us to resolve.

Human analytics or George Orwell redux?

The ethics of the privacy-versus-transparency paradox is perhaps the most nuanced. Current technologies can harness all the human communications data of employees, such as email and social media, and apply such analytical power as to profile every employee in ways never imagined before. Data analytics now has the power to answer basic questions on human dynamics, such as: Who knows whom? Who knows what? Who are the go-to people? Who are the potential leaders? The value of such knowledge is obviously compelling to all enterprises.

However, the associated privacy issues have not been addressed and are disquieting, at best. In fact, we may need to completely rethink the concept of privacy, since many elements appear contradictory. On the one hand, privacy could mean no knowledge of

relevant data: on the other hand, it could also simply mean that known information

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One side takes the approach of knowing less, while the other actively seeks to know more to exert data control. An example that highlights this paradox is the CIA. Its system of managing classified information could arguably be very intrusive but also provide the most privacy, because you can read only what you're allowed to read.

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Decoding digital ethics

If knowledge is power, we may be creating a crisis in ethics. As digital technology places more and more power into the hands of management, it begins to complicate the role of ethics versus enforced behavior. Is ethics becoming less a matter of free will and choice and more a product of compliance under threat of punishment? Do we care? Should we care?

We should. In the long run, ethics is self-driven and self-sustaining. By contrast, compliance under threat of sanctions is temporary and lasts only as long as there is adequate surveillance. Absent that, unethical behavior flourishes, as we have seen with the major corporate scandals that emerge with alarming regularity. It is critical that top management actively guide and nurture organizational ethics for the health and longevity of the enterprise.

In fact, there appears to be an added momentum in favor of ethics and self-governance. Companies have begun to formalize whistleblower laws that offer employees huge economic incentives for exposing wrongdoings by their employers. While there are many arguments regarding the best way to handle whistleblowing, there appears to be some consensus that transparency helps to mitigate this issue.

The road ahead: Governance and analytics *pas de deux*

As the information economy takes hold, organizations are busy formulating and implementing their information strategies. They typically include two key information initiatives: governance, which minimizes regulatory and legal risk, and data analytics, which mines all data to extract insights.



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During this time, it may be wise to convene an information governance committee. This is an opportune time for management to decide what kind of compliance and ethical values they want the latest information technologies to usher in and nurture. The committee can help define corporate policies on gathering, handling, managing, and analyzing what is perhaps the most significant asset of the future enterprise: information.

Concurrently, organizations should begin internal assessments of current employee values on privacy, ethics, and fair use of data. You may need to account for significant culture and regulatory variations across different regions and countries, such as GDPR in the EU. Such findings can then inform and guide the information governance committee in its policy definitions.

The new breed of analytics and information technologies available today is unlike anything we have ever seen before. Like all powerful technologies, they're extremely difficult to put back in the bag once taken out, so organizations should think long and hard about the ethical implications before proceeding. The road they choose could make all the difference.

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