

Big Tech's Capitalization of AI Ethics: Reflections on the Politicization of AI Ethics

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Abstract

The efforts of Big Tech to promote trustworthy AI have been associated with “ethics washing” and self-regulation as means of combatting new legislative measures introduced by governments and international communities. A new form of “virtue economy” has been built around AI ethics, within which Big Tech acts as a “buyer,” while university ethics labs work as “suppliers.” This paper examines Big Tech’s efforts to harness AI ethics for its own rhetorical use and the response of the academic world to this effort to capitalize ethics. Drawing on political theory, we call this process the politicization of AI ethics. This paper sheds light on critical discussions of tech ethics that examine the combined power of capitalism and technology and its societal implications. By diagnosing the tech industry with political intentions, critical tech ethics therefore assumes a crucial task: restoring the credibility of academic ethics so that it can provide remedies for the problems in society caused by datafication and algorithmic systems.

Keywords

Big Tech, AI, ethics, politicization, virtue economy

1. Introduction

Use “AI ethics” has been increasingly identified as a means of support for tech companies’ deregulation and self-regulatory efforts, which are meant to combat new legislative measures introduced by governments. Among others, Metcalf, Moss, and Bloyd [1] and James and Whelan [2] argue that ethical artificial intelligence (AI) has been normalized as a new asset in the tech industry, which has turned recent scandals encountered in this field (e.g., Cambridge Analytics) into “ethical issues.” Wagner [3] summarized this view in the claim that “ethics is the new industry self-regulation.” For instance, Facebook [4] announced that it has organized its responsible AI efforts around five key pillars: privacy and security, fairness and inclusion, robustness and safety, transparency and control, and accountability and governance. Google, in turn, published ethical principles that emphasize the need for AI applications to be socially beneficial, avoid creating or reinforcing bias, and be safe and accountable [5]. Similarly, Microsoft [6] has codified company procedures to develop safe and trustworthy AI. Scholars have viewed Big Tech’s version of AI ethics mainly as a performative gesture and a form of reputation-polishing that evince no desire to make any fundamental changes at the corporate level [7].

Scholars have used the terms “ethics shopping,” “ethics theatre,” and “ethics washing” to describe how instrumentalizing ethics creates misleading communications about, and impressions of, ethical AI [8, 9]. Big Tech’s instrumentalization of ethics as a rhetorical weapon is thought to have serious consequences for academic ethics research [10, 7]. Phan and colleagues [7] argue that Big Tech has transformed AI ethics into a form of capital—a transactional object external to the organization—and thus one of the many “things” that contemporary capitalists must tame and procure. Interestingly, this capital is primarily produced by AI ethics researchers at universities and other research centers, and it is then accumulated or consumed by Big Tech. To recycle, accumulate, or consume AI ethics, technology companies sponsor and organize, for example, gatherings such as the annual ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency. In 2023, in exchange for

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a \$75,000 sponsorship, a company could secure a verbal acknowledgment of their contribution in the opening and closing remarks of the conference and their logo displayed in the conference venue.

This paper examines Big Tech's efforts to harness AI ethics for its own rhetorical use and how scholars, journalists, and activists have responded to this pursuit to capitalize ethics. Drawing on political theory [11], we call this process *the politicization of AI ethics*. Following Palonen's [12] formulation, *politicization* means identifying relevant power structures and making visible the political potential of disruptive discourses and activities. The politicization of AI ethics thus refers to the act of labeling something as political—in this case, disclosing the methods and power mechanisms behind how Big Tech harnesses ethics for its own goals and interests.

Academic ethics research is often thought to be a neutral and context-independent methodology that is clearly divided from self-interested corporate rhetoric. This boundary has become increasingly blurred in the debate over AI ethics, as all the actors use the same terminology and conceptualizations. This paper examines the combined power of capitalism and technology and its societal implications. Contrary to some philosophers' claims [13], I suggest that academic tech ethics can and should address questions of power in close collaboration with other academic disciplines, such as science and technology studies (STS) and feminist studies, to make sense of the problematic appropriation of ethics by the tech sector.

2. AI Ethics Harnessed by Big Tech

For decades, philosophers have described how technology embeds politics and shapes social outcomes [14]. However, the fast rise and great potential of AI have renewed the urgency of considering the complex political nature of the AI industry. This paper argues for a fine-grained conception of the political that can capture the novel forms of politicization observed in this industry. The efforts of Big Tech to promote trustworthy AI indicate a highly calculated stance in which their methods seem designed more to avoid reputational risks than to acknowledge the political nature of AI and its implications [1,2]. While the intentions behind these initiatives may sometimes be considered good or innocent, Big Tech's practices demonstrate how it uses its power and vast profits to lobby for legislation at the national and international levels.

There is a long history of corporations funding scientific research in a way that strategically advances their business agendas and polishes their reputations [15]. This tactic is perhaps most famously associated with Big Tobacco and Big Pharma, but it is now increasingly used to describe the actions of Big Tech [16]. Google has funded research on the ethics of technology since 2005 [17]. In the 2010s, Oxford University alone received at least £17 million from Google. While most of this grant money was spent on technical research, Alphabet has also funded work on AI ethics at the Oxford Internet Institute. In 2019, Facebook donated \$7.5 million to the Technical University of Munich so that this university could set up a new AI ethics research center [18]. Meanwhile, the US National Science Foundation announced that it is partnering with Amazon, with each group committing up to \$10 million in research grants over the next three years to work on fairness in AI [19].

Phan et al. [7] argue that the tech industry has become a primary buyer of ethical research output in the "virtue economy," which is supplied by allied university labs. This virtue capital relies upon the autonomy of high-ranked academic scholars and is then translated back into economic capital through funding, joint conferences, the invitation of in-house ethics professionals, etc. Scholars recruited as suppliers of virtue can be easily dismissed if their statements betray any resistance to existing corporate business models [20]. So-called "in-house moral philosophers," or ethics committees in tech companies, have little power to shape the internal policies of the companies [21]. In this way, Big Tech has attempted to manage the work of ethicists by aligning public universities and commercial interests in ways that situate scholars at the center of the economy of virtue while maintaining control over funding, output, and key corporate decisions. This is an effort to promote the reputation of tech companies as generous saviors while simultaneously trying to tackle the legal challenges, such as tax systems, that arise when governments themselves try to harness the power of Big Tech. Thus, the discourse of ethical AI has been strategically aligned with Big Tech's efforts to avoid legally enforceable restrictions on its controversial technologies [20].

Politicization generally implies a demand or action that identifies an issue as political—thus making previously apolitical, objective, or “neutral” matters political [11]. The politicization of AI ethics can be identified in multiple maneuvers through which Big Tech claims to establish and follow ethical rules by highlighting them rather than other relevant issues, such as their business models. As Palonen et al. [11] put it, a typical and particularly intensive way of doing politics is to declare that one’s own activity is “unpolitical,” that is, ethical, scientific, or impartial. As Bietti [10] points out, talking about AI ethics instead of AI politics can be seen as a sign that the field’s methods are being depoliticized and normalized to influence different actors in society. Many methods used by tech giants are indirect and covert in such a way that the companies cannot be accused of corruption or illegal procedures. These “soft” forms of influence include providing research funding for AI ethics research and cooperating with universities.

As governments slash public funding for universities all over the world while, accordingly, universities push their research staff to attract industry money, the dilemmas and paradoxes that researchers encounter become more acute [7]. Instead of corrupting individual academic scholars through direct research funding, tech companies provide funding to universities that employ scientifically high-ranked scholars in AI ethics posts. For researchers, this arrangement appears preferable to, or more ethically defensible than, accepting research funding directly from Big Tech. Yochai Benkler [18] argues that universities abdicate their critical role when they accept funding from the tech industry to study the moral, political, and legal implications of practices that are core to the business model of this sector.

Big Tech’s virtue economy demonstrates the peculiar positionality of scholars working at the intersection of these complex circulations of money and the products of AI ethics. As suppliers of ethical capital, academic researchers in universities must adjust to their new position as producers of AI ethics in this new economy of virtue. Phan and her colleagues summarize this shift:

Participating in the economy of virtue from this position makes a great deal of sense. It enables researchers to independently pursue critiques of technology companies while properly resourced, and simultaneously satisfies institutional demands in ways that would otherwise not be possible, all while producing reputational resources that are cashed out by Big Capital, but not Big Tech. [7:130]

One could say that, for researchers, this is a win-win situation: talented researchers benefit financially from the support provided by the tech industry but can still maintain their autonomous position in relation to companies and criticize the latter’s operations. Still, researchers in the field of AI ethics are strongly divided when it comes to close collaboration with tech companies on AI ethics research. Many doubt that corporate funding could ever put a researcher in an entirely independent position.

In conclusion, while academic ethics is not accused of legitimizing the politicization of AI ethics, it may suffer from significant methodological shortcomings and blind spots when analyzing technology policy within capitalism. Diagnosing the political intentions of AI ethics is therefore essential for restoring the credibility of academic ethics and supporting its mission to provide remedies for the problems in society caused by datafication and algorithmic systems.

3. The Politicization of AI Ethics and Counterforces

The politicization of AI ethics discourses indicates a need to expand the academic scope of tech ethics by acknowledging tech companies and their stakeholders as significant political agents [22]. Doing so broadens the focus beyond “trustful AI” to the infrastructure and governance of sociotechnical systems—not to mention the market fundamentalism of Big Tech—thus opening up new avenues for examining the policies of the tech industry. On this view, many of the central problems related to big data and complex algorithms are connected to broader issues of social and political (in)justice. Therefore, it is essential to consider which new kinds of ethical conceptualizations and methodologies are needed to study the entanglement of capitalism and technology, and thereby to provide a more expansive approach to remediating the impacts of algorithmic systems on society.

Recently, several novel ethical approaches, such as “embedded AI ethics” [23], “the ethics of AI ethics” [9], and “meta-framework AI ethics” [24], have been proposed to repair the shortcomings of mainstream AI ethics. Critical AI ethics has turned to the field of critical theory to diagnose the power structures and dynamisms that arise from AI’s relation to present-day capitalism [25]. In this context, one of the key questions concerns what kinds of empirical resources, theorizations, and conceptualizations—for instance, those offered by STS, political science, and political philosophy—can enable critical tech ethics to contribute to existing technology policy debates. In debates over the impact of AI technologies on society, critical tech ethics must resist prejudicial beliefs that it is too abstract and formal (the ivory tower dilemma) to inform concrete policy or too bound to empirical research to make normative statements. Thus, critical tech ethics must strike a balance between being able to use empirical research and social theories while maintaining its moral authority to produce normative claims. Clearly, restructuring the values and practices of AI ethics around a political vision of social justice will not be easy or happen immediately, but I suggest three steps that the discourse of critical tech ethics can take to increase its importance in technology policy debates.

First, critical tech ethics can provide methodological approaches to identifying assumptions taken for granted or blind spots that remain unrecognized in the mainstream discourse on AI ethics. The main ethical principles in the discourse of AI ethics, such as fairness, privacy, reliability, transparency, explainability, and accountability, can be acknowledged to reproduce, rather than transform, existing social values in liberal welfare societies [2]. The relevant question is whether formal principles of ethical AI are meaningful when these principles are distant from the complex solutions needed to implement algorithmic systems in digital services or public administration. In fact, establishing such principles is the minimum that can be expected of algorithmic governance, yet many AI scandals all over the world show that AI-driven services can produce inequitable outcomes never before witnessed.

Second, analyzing the ideologies at the foundation of the tech industry, such as technological solutionism or technological optimism, allows us to broaden our perspective and view the statements of agents in the tech industry through a wider lens, thereby overcoming confusions, correcting inconsistencies, and drawing clarificatory distinctions. When ethical issues, such as biases, are identified in AI-driven social benefit distribution systems, agents in the tech industry often respond by proposing more accurate and complex technical solutions—rarely are solutions focused on advancing social practices, such as equalizing tax systems and income distribution, or increasing the production of cheap housing. Representatives of the tech industry often frame social issues, such as equality, as challenges amenable to technological solutions [1]. In many cases, the ideology of technological solutionism promotes the belief that social issues arise from imperfect technical solutions. Thus, the desire for technological solutions promotes an optimistic—yet ultimately callous—search to optimize and mechanize systems believed to secure ethical neutrality.

Third, through the lens of critical tech ethics, we can shift from a narrow focus on fairness, accountability, and transparency to an assessment of the kinds of problems AI poses in contemporary society. The problem is not only whether AI-based services and products respect ethical principles, but above all, how the profit-motivated actions of tech companies can undermine people’s well-being and the realization of an equal society. Critical tech ethics should be understood as an explanatory mode of inquiry that requires us to set out the reasons for advancing beneficial solutions that do not involve new technologies. Thus far, the discourse around ethical AI has obscured the real problems associated with the implementation of algorithmic systems in both the private and public sectors [2].

4. Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed the symbiotic relationship between Big Tech and academic AI ethics and how it can obscure the fundamental fact of political contestation undergirding the ethical issues at stake. I have shown how the dominant discourses in AI ethics are unable to challenge the legitimacy of algorithmic systems and instead often reinforce an understanding of AI as an imminent and inescapable aspect of societal development. Recentering the values and practices of AI ethics around political visions of social justice will not be easy or happen immediately, but I have proposed three steps for reversing the course of critical AI ethics and increasing its relevance in technology policy

debates. I have argued that critical tech ethics should widen its scope and have the courage to promote practices in which technology is not treated as the only solution to social and ecological problems.

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Declaration on Generative AI

The author has not employed any Generative AI tools.

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