WHAT IS DIGITAL ETHICS?

Dansk
Design Center

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Designing ethical digital solutions is about far more than data ethics. It is also important to have ethics in mind when working with other digital aspects such as automation and behavioral design.

When in 2018, the company Cambridge Analytica had harvested personal data from millions of Facebook users - it was the end of 20 years of technology optimism and the beginning of a new conversation where digital technology is not unconditionally good but has dark sides.

The conversation has primarily been about the use and misuse of personal data, and within data, real progress has been made both in law and ethics. In Europe, we now have GDPR. In Denmark, we now have a data ethics council, and virtually all companies today are aware that proper handling of personal data is just as important as the company's other CSR policies.

When you talk about digital ethics, you will, therefore, very quickly talk about data ethics. But digital ethics is about more than personal data. Digital ethics is, in a broad sense, about how the digital revolution has created new tools, interfaces, and business models that change the relationship between people, companies, and public authorities.

It can quickly become very confusing, and therefore in the project "The Digital Ethics Compass," we have chosen to divide the concept of digital ethics into three different areas.

1.
Data ethics is about behaving properly (and legally) when collecting and using personal data. Ethically handling data is about protecting people's need for privacy in a digital world where data is becoming more and more valuable. In the worst case, poor data ethics leads to people feeling monitored and deprived of control over their own lives. And from the companies' perspective, the long-term consequences of poor data ethics are that customers lose confidence in companies and digital services in general.

2.
Automation ethics concerns how automation and algorithms are increasingly being used to make decisions with consequences for human lives. It can be a loan application rejected by an algorithm or a self-driving car that is driving incorrectly. In the worst case, poor automation ethics can create a world where people are exposed to unjust, inhuman, or incomprehensible decisions that they cannot subsequently explain. From a societal perspective, poor automation ethics can further shift the balance of power between businesses and consumers to the benefit of businesses, creating inefficient markets, monopolies, and dissatisfied consumers.

3.
Behavioral design ethics is about digital designers getting better at using behavioral control methods to manipulate people's brains. And combining knowledge of behavior with algorithms and massive data sets, you can become so good at nudging users that it becomes hyper-nudging, where you can essentially remotely control users to perform specific actions and think certain thoughts. Nudging is often highlighted as a method that helps people make better, healthier, and more intelligent choices. An example from the real world is the City of Copenhagen, which paints discrete footprints that lead to rubbish bins on the street to nudge people into throwing rubbish in trash bins instead of on the street. But nudging can also promote companies' narrow goals alone. At worst, poor nudging ethics can lead to digital addiction and user manipulation, which in turn can lead to passivity or digital rebellion, with people opting out of the digital world altogether.

As mentioned, there is already a significant focus on data ethics where legislation and ethical guidelines have been developed. There is also a growing focus on automation ethics. However, many companies still do not consider algorithms to be a potential ethical issue at all. And many companies can get away with somewhat problematic use of algorithms without authorities that have the capacity or qualifications to pursue the cases. Nudging is often considered an unconditionally positive science, and only a few digital designers make ethical considerations when using something from the behaviorist toolbox.

In the project "The Digital Ethics Compass," we strive to focus on all these three areas so the conversation in the future is not just about data ethics.

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Based on the book Creative Ethics, we try to define the concept of ethics and use these definitions to set the overall direction for the learning process in the Digital Ethics Compass.

The word ethics is frequently used in today's societal debate. We expect companies to behave ethically, we create data ethics councils, and companies make guidelines for the ethical use of artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, few people have a clear understanding of what ethics is. Is it the same as morality? About following rules? Is there a difference between ethics and legislation? Can the company's ethics be written down on a piece of paper?

We have found some suggestions for a clear definition in the book "Creative Ethics," written by a longtime member of the Council of Ethics, Jacob Birkler. He defines ethics as "... What I or we have to abide to in the meeting with the other".

The ethical is not necessarily rules or guidelines. It's about having ethical awareness and some mental tools available that help one resolve the conflicts and dilemmas one encounters when meeting others or when - as in the case of digital services - designs products for other people.

Where laws and written rules answer what I MUST do, then ethics and etiquette are the unwritten answer to what I SHOULD do. A classic example may be about the problem for or against active euthanasia, where on the one hand, you want to preserve the life of patients for as long as possible. But on the other hand, you want to give people the freedom to choose to end a perhaps painful or violent limited life.

Birkler's definition of an ethical dilemma reads as follows:

"The ethical dilemma is a difficult conflict of values, where one choice must be made between several alternative courses of action. A choice whose outcome has consequences for other people."

We have taken this definition as our starting point when working with the project "The Digital Ethics Compass," and it has given us some guidelines for the course:

1.
We do not attempt to transfer a specific code of conduct to participating companies. Ethics is not about *"learning the right rules."* Ethics is about sharpening one's ethical sense and the personal ability to resolve complex value conflicts..

2.
The project's primary goal is to give companies and employees a language and tools to talk about ethical issues.

3.
Ethics is about competencies to resolve value conflicts, and therefore we have filled our course with practical exercises in handling these kinds of situations.

4.
Our course must cultivate the ability to doubt and ask questions in new ways. We should not seek consensus, but on the contrary, exemplify how there will always be doubt and conflict the more people there are in a room. However, we must highlight doubt and conflict as positive qualities that we can handle if we have the right tools.

5.
In our course, we talk about the boundaries between law and ethics. It must be clear to the participants that there is a difference between what you must do and what you should do.