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Fiona McEvoy, Tech Ethics Writer

The Evolving Role of Ethics in Technology

Fiona discusses ethics in technology, data as the price, and the danger of ignoring the end user for companies.

05:13   Is cybercrime being redefined by tech ethicists?

10:31   Younger generations are complacent about their data as the price of admission, but companies should not take this as carte blanche to do what they like.

14:46   No enterprise wants to be the first to set the ethical bar because it could put them at a competitive disadvantage.

16:33   Companies that ignore these issues and don't respect the ultimate end user might end up regretful.

18:00   There has been progress in the field of tech ethics, but it is slow.

21:52   Technologists and other stakeholders need to educate the broader population on how to use technology in a way that advantages them and doesn't disadvantage them.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:00:37] This is the UberKnowledge podcast. With me today, I have a really, really interesting guest. I'm actually going to read from your LinkedIn profile, "She's a thinker, a writer, and a speaker about how technologies and technology companies interact with people and societies." That should be enough to get everyone's attention. So, Fiona McEvoy is my guest. Why don't you introduce yourself to our listeners and then we can get going?

Fiona McEvoy: [00:01:05] Thanks very much, Ashwin. I'm delighted to be here. Yeah, you kind of summed it up. I look at a very broad spectrum of ethical issues when it comes to technologies and how they interact with societies and individuals. I write, I'm a blogger, which is kind of where it all started after I graduated with my master's thesis, which looks specifically at the ethics of big data. I blog. I still write academically. I'm presenting it to academic conferences over the next two months, actually. I speak at kind of more commercial technology and AI conferences. I've been lucky enough to write in the media as well. So, spinning a lot of plates but all on this very important issue.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:01:49] Absolutely, let's start with your blog. You have many blogs. I want to talk about one called All Turtles. It's a very, very interesting collection of thought leadership articles — and a note to listeners to check it out, the website is all-turtles.com — but there's one particular comment on an article that I wanted to point out, and we can dig a little deeper into that. The statement is, "If the internet trolls are cybercriminals, can AI stop them?" The thing that really caught my attention, obviously, this is a very, very interesting, catchy title, but the person you had chronicled in the article is somebody that I hold in a

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very high degree of esteem, Alex Stamos ex-CISO of Facebook. Let's talk about what he said, which is "The vast majority of harm that is caused by technology does not have any kind of interesting technical component. It is the technically correct use of products we use to cause harm." Back to your point that you mentioned earlier about the AI ethics piece, he says "We must consider how or if AI can help us counter cruel and malicious acts on the internet." So this is a lot, can you unpack that for the listeners, where is this coming from, and where are we today as a society?

Fiona McEvoy: [00:03:07] I thought this was a really interesting idea. These were comments made by Stamos at Tech Crunch Disrupt, the very large tech conference that is mainly focused on startups in San Francisco. I was in attendance and this grabbed me as someone who thinks about ethics quite a lot. And if I'm honest, I don't do a lot around cybercrime and cybersecurity, so I thought it was kind of an interesting angle that I certainly hadn't thought of. It was this idea that we think about cybersecurity in a very specific way. We think about hacks and international espionage and those kind of threats, and what we don't think about are other crimes that are committed online. We can think about child pornography or cyber bullying and some of the ways in which ordinary technologies are weaponized in kind of malicious ways, but not in a way that we ultimately currently categorize as cybercrime. And Stamos, I mean, he's now taken a position at Stanford and he's

interested in expanding the definition of what counts as cybercrime. I guess as a sort of corollary to that also expanding the definition of what counts as cybersecurity. So that might mean thinking about how we deploy AI and machine learning to identify the very kind of human signifiers of this separate kind of cybercriminality.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:04:31] It is a really novel thought, like you mentioned. So, given your role as somebody who attends a lot of these conferences and somebody who connects with a lot of thought leaders, are you seeing the perception — I mean, I've been in the security industry for 20 years and we have, I wouldn't say a myopic, but we have a very fixated view on what cybercrime is and isn't, and how we counter that — so are you seeing a new breed of techno ethicists or a new breed of philosophers, even a new breed of generation X, Y, Zs, whatever they're called right now, to look at the problem statement that you articulate so well and be able to look at different ways of solving this large-scale problem?

Fiona McEvoy: [00:05:13] Yeah, I think there's undoubtedly a long way to go, but yes, absolutely there are conversations. I think, actually, as more people are moving into technology from kind of liberal arts backgrounds, from a humanities background, from a social science background, tech as a whole is being reconceptualized in a different way, and cybersecurity is a huge part of that. There are people having conversations, and as I say, I don't think there are solutions precipitating out just yet, but people are starting to think about how do we reconceive of the threat, or how do we broaden out the category of the threat, and then once we understand it better, how do we use technology to tackle those threats, to protect people, and not just to protect people's money, but to protect people as humans, their humanity, especially when thinking about things like child pornography or cyber bullying. It's not just about hacking systems and siphoning away cash or bringing down particular infrastructures. It's also about just protecting people as people.

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Ashwin Krishnan: [00:06:15] Yes. So that leads me into the next question, which I was kind of formulating in my head as you were speaking. Sticking with Alex Stamos, the CISO of arguably the most prominent social network on the planet, ex-CISO rather, the traditional definition of a CISO — and let's take a B2B because I think it makes it more current and real — as you mentioned, infrastructure, you mentioned assets, and these are all things that an enterprise owns. So, I can put a "boundary" around that, even though with cloud it gets a little blurry. But let's say, for argument's sake, I know what my assets are, and I know what I need to protect. And then you have this grayness, if you will, where there's customer data that I'm collecting and is that part of the periphery of data that I need to be worried about? Like you said, is there a new breed of CISOs that are looking at the problem and saying, "OK, it's not just about the enterprise assets, it's also about the customers data that we may be aware we are collecting or in many cases we may not be aware that we're collecting." How does

the thinking there need to evolve?

Fiona McEvoy: [00:07:27] Yeah, I think there are. The short answer to your question, but I think more thinking needs to be done around this, is slowly but surely. I think with the things that happened with Facebook, for example, with those kind of episodes being very prominent in the media, and I don't mean to single out Facebook because they're not the only ones to have seen a fall, but I think there is definitely a tendency now to be more forward thinking. Nobody really predicted what was going to happen with Facebook, but it happened. And there's this tendency to think about, exactly as you're saying, OK, what other data are we collecting? How do we need to be thinking? How do we need to be redefining our mindsets to try and preempt these kinds of issues that are coming down the line? It could be CISOS. I know somebody who just wrote on my blog, youthedata.com, he's interested in product design. He said, traditionally, product design was all about thinking, basically, how do we entice consumers and sell our products and those kind of things and make them use these products time and time again. Then he said, but now there is a kind of ethical aspect to that, thinking about what aspects of the consumer's lifestyle do we need to be protecting? Maybe we shouldn't be making things that are addictive and those are being built into the approach of professionals working in the field now, I think. I don't think it's a huge wave, but I think it's a slow rolling tide. And hopefully we'll see more of that kind of thought.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:09:02] You mentioned something in passing, which I want to highlight, which is your other website, youthedata.com. I want to pause there just for a minute for the listeners. We keep hearing about there's no such thing as free. If it's free, you're giving up your data. But I think the domain name that you have, youthedata.com just sums it up, which is you and me, we are the sources of data. But at the same time, I was reading an article the other day, where they were talking about there's really a couple of reactions when you tell people, get off Google or Facebook or Twitter, they're after your data. Number one is, "Hey, I'm not important enough. What are they going to do with my data?" Number two is, "They have it anyway, so what's the big deal?"

> "How do we need to be redefining our mindsets to try and preempt these kinds of issues?"

[00:09:49] Given your broad perspective, having touched a lot of consumers as well as enterprises, is there fatigue setting in? I know we're still early, right, in terms of understanding the implications of what collecting data means, what transparency means, but for the larger consumers, most of whom are non-tech, how much fatigue is setting in? You're talking with Alexa, you're talking about Google Nest, and so on and so forth. I can't keep up with it.

Fiona McEvoy: [00:10:20] Yeah, I think there is, and I think the trouble is it's being converted into complacency. I should say quickly that I don't own All Turtles, I'm a contributor at All Turtles.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:10:27] OK.

Fiona McEvoy: [00:10:31] But you're quite right, this is something that's quite interesting. I actually taught a class on ethics, the ethics of contemporary issues. We talked about this as, you know, this is a group of freshmen at SF State University, and it was really interesting to me to hear the perspectives of people who were born post-internet, shall we say, and post-ubiquitous devices, in some cases. And they were very laid back about it. They were like, well, they've got our data anyway, like you say, I'm anonymized, or I don't really matter. And I think it's a really interesting conundrum.

[00:11:14] But I don't think that companies should take consumer complacency as the green flag for them doing whatever they want with consumer data. It's not that we need to have a consensus about anything with regard to what is done with that data. I think there needs to be a certain moral imperative to just make sure that companies do the right thing and they don't abuse their privileges and they don't deliberately target people. I think you're right, there is this kind of very laid back sense in that, well, if I want an Alexa, then that's the payoff. They take my data, if I want a nest and that's just the price I have to pay to have security. But these aren't necessarily a given.

[00:11:58] I don't know whether you've seen the book, "Surveillance Capitalism," it's relatively new, it was released in January this year. And there was a project long ago, I think it was in the year 2000, where a college in the US, and I forget which, it may have been MIT, created a smart home, which did a lot of the stuff that smart homes do now in terms of your Nests and that kind of thing. But the very premise of creating this kind of prototype was that the data would be owned by the people in it, and that was just a given. Nobody quibbled that; everybody was comfortable with that. And now we see quite the opposite. It's just a given that your data is siphoned off and sold elsewhere in many cases, and there's no real way to track where it goes. And then the difficulty is in wondering if it is a payoff, and if home security comes with a price, then what's a fair price? And how much awareness should those consumers have?

> "There needs to be a certain moral imperative to just make sure that companies do the right thing."

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:13:01] That's an interesting point. I think there are books being written to that effect. "Surveillance Capitalism" is absolutely one that I've heard many, many times over the course of the last couple of weeks, so clearly it's making the rounds. But I think there are others. There are a few books that have been written on the topic of essentially, you have an AI custodian or you have an AI bot that watches out for Fiona. It gives you guidance as to what you should and shouldn't do. But again, it seems for the average person, any sort of technology needs to be easy to consume. Otherwise they're going to end up, like you said, being complacent about them, and, obviously, when something bad happens, they pretend they were not informed.

[00:13:50] So the other piece of it is, and again, this is more to the business side of things, I can make an argument, I'm not saying it's the right argument, but I could

make an argument saying, exactly like you said, my consumers are complacent and the competitive environment is so ridiculously dog-eat-dog that if I stand up to an ethical bar, if I make transparency the norm, then I'm going to be at a business disadvantage. So, until the entire community starts to behave this way, I'm not going to be the first one. Again, I'm just making this argument, not saying it's a good one, but it's a business argument saying, you know what, I'll competitively be at a disadvantage if I really take a moral stand on behalf of my consumers. How does the ethical person in you, the journalist, the writer, the speaker address this?

Fiona McEvoy: [00:14:46] Firstly, I think it's a really fair question. Nobody wants to be the first mover in those kind of scenarios when it seems to, as you say, it puts you at an economic disadvantage compared to your competitors. I think it's an interesting point. And I guess the way that I would address it is that, ultimately, I at least hope that we are seeing a wave of ethical consumerism, and I think young people that I speak with are becoming more and more informed. I referenced that class, but there is also another wave of younger people who are becoming interested in tech ethics. I get contacted by people a lot, and I hope that this sparks a wave of consumerism that has the consumer in the driving seat. And also, they interrogate the products that they use and hold those companies to account. And then the companies that do put some kind of ethical thought into the way that they

> "I don't think it's a small movement; I think it's a large one, and I think it's a growing one."

design and the way that they produce their technologies will ultimately arise the winner. Will that happen? I honestly don't know. I wish I had a crystal ball, but I would urge businesses to think about this and to think about the way that they build products, because actually, you know, this isn't just a few people like me speaking at conferences. There are serious moves within Silicon Valley to hire ethicists. And I know it's been controversial in different parts, but that is happening. And we know now that governments all across the globe are sitting up and thinking about this, thinking about how we create ethical technology. I don't think it's a small movement; I think it's a large one, and I think it's a growing one.

[00:16:33] From my perspective, I think those that ignore these issues and continue to produce technologies that perhaps don't respect the ultimate end user might well end up regretful of that when, I don't know, new legislation lands or we have this wave of ethical consumers that are less interested in companies that appear to take their data and abuse it, for want of a better term.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:17:02] Yeah, I completely agree with you. I think you're right. Somebody who can stand up over there and have a backbone and be able to become that first mover.

Fiona McEvoy: [00:17:11] Easier said than done, though, I do appreciate that.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:17:17] So, one more thing, and we'll probably wrap up with this. This is a pretty interesting blog that you've written on the four AI themes to watch out

for in 2019: privacy, tech regulation, AI ethics, and AI authenticity. We are not quite at the midway point, but let's say we are a third into the year. So where do you see, especially when it comes to privacy and AI authenticity, where do we stand? I mean, we see forward progress being made on the business side, on the consumer side we talked about. Or is it really these conferences where like-minded folks like you come together and then walk off.

Fiona McEvoy: [00:18:00] I actually think there is some progress. I don't know whether my fellow enthusiasts around tech ethics would necessarily chime loudly in agreement with me, but I do think that there has been some progress. I started doing this now about four years ago, specifically we started talking about big data ethics and that kind of morphed into AI and other technologies. There weren't many resources, there were people and certainly within academic institutions there were people doing stuff, but it wasn't a common conversation. And you didn't make many friends at the tech conferences; I'll put it that way.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:18:44] [Laughs] I can believe that!

Fiona McEvoy: [00:18:44] And now, as I said to you, I've been kind of running around and speaking at a lot of things; it feels for the first time that people are really listening. And I know that a lot of people would turn around to me, who do similar sorts of stuff to things that I do, and say, oh, it's a PR thing; they just want to be seen to be ethical. This is a movement that is less to do about ethics and most to do with that reputation management. I can see some of that as well. I'm just pleased that it's there. Through the course of just the last few months I've not seen anything really tangibly change, although we have seen a host of regulations and those kind of things, and I am still worried about the authenticity piece. I don't think that's a conversation that's happening enough. But broadly speaking, at least as long as I've been doing this, there are a lot more people like yourself who are having important conversations trying to get to grips with what are really, really broad questions. I mean, I come at this from a philosophy background, and I can tell you people have been tackling these issues for 2,000-3,000 years minimum. Well, more than that, Western philosophy goes much, much further back than that.

> "I am still worried about the authenticity piece. I don't think that's a conversation that's happening enough."

[00:19:57] You know, it's not easy to think about these things. It's not easy to make choices as a business, which may ultimately impact on your bottom line. But people are, I think, starting to think about them. That actually encourages me that we're going in the right direction. Whether we're going to see action within the year on some of the bigger issues like regulation, again, I wouldn't like to say. I'm not following things like, we know California's taken action on privacy, but I've not followed deeply the regulation within the U.S. We all know about the GDPR. Whether we're going to see more ubiquitous stuff, I honestly don't know in different jurisdictions, but at least we can see some of the cogs turning, and it feels like we're slowly, slowly grinding in the

right direction.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:20:53] So let's close it off with one last question. This is something that I feel strongly about, but I just want to pose the question to you. We talk about big data, AI, machine learning and this is not just limited to the tech industry, I mean, everything from utilities to heavy industry to healthcare, etc. Is there a moral imperative, in your opinion, for the tech industry, which really is the birthplace of a lot of these technologies, to become not just the practitioner but also the evangelist about how to use tech ethically? I mean, so far we've seen the Facebook mea culpa over and over again. But is there opportunity? I mean, the reason I'm even having this conversation is because I feel that there is a moral obligation for people who understand technology to be the ones to actually raise the flag and say, you know what, this needs to be done differently.

Fiona McEvoy: [00:21:51] I think my short answer is yes. I understand that is asking quite a lot in some cases. It's not easy, as I've said, it's not an easy thing. But I think ultimately, yes. And I know that any philosophers who listen will be like, define moral imperative and that kind of thing. But without getting bogged down in that, which is also important, I think taking moral imperative in a way that an ordinary person who's not a philosopher might use it, I would argue that there is. I think if you understand something that may ultimately ... this is what I always say when I talk, this is something that is necessarily going to affect all of our lives. And at the moment there's very concentrated knowledge about it. It might be in academia or it might be in Silicon Valley and other places like it or, to a certain degree, governments are now starting to get to grips with it, but it affects all of us. And I think the less concentrated that knowledge can be, the better. So, yeah, I'm keen to see technologists and any other stakeholders throw this conversation open to the broader population and educate them as to how to use technology in a way that advantages them and doesn't disadvantage them.

> "The less concentrated that knowledge can be, the better."

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:23:10] Super. This has been a really eye-opening, mind-opening conversation for me and hopefully for the listeners as well. So, Fiona, I thank you for your time. Good luck with everything else. I'm looking forward to future conversations.

Fiona McEvoy: [00:23:22] Awesome. You too. Thanks, Ashwin.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:22:54] Thank you.