

Ethics review for AI surveillance research

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Algorithms based on user data raise new moral dilemmas for the scientists who develop them. When they are used to manipulate democracy, support oppressive regimes or disadvantage minorities engineers become a cog in a machine they would not knowingly endorse.

Academics could make an important contribution to resolving this dilemma. Machine learning research should seek Institutional Review Board approval, just as other fields do, and journals should insist on this approval. Data scientists in industry should be held accountable to professional guidelines by organizations like ACM and IEEE (<http://ethicsinaction.ieee.org/>). Moreover, research that combines academic and corporate interests should be disclosed (also standard in other fields).

As surveillance is combined with intelligent forms of behaviour-change technology, a new social contract around data is required (see also <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-03912-z>). Unlike the organizations that use surveillance data (eg. media companies and governments), the people monitored neither benefit reciprocally, nor have full awareness or control over how their data are used (uninformed consent), as poignantly illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal (see <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-03856-4>). IRB approval, professional guidelines and disclosures provide established pathways to more ethical AI.