

Digital Ethics by Futurist Gerd Leonhard

February 6 - Issue #3 - [View online](#)

Futurist Gerd Leonhard's latest findings from the intersection of humanity and technology, focusing on Digital Ethics i.e. the ethics of exponential technological change and related Technology/Humanity topics

This newsletter is a highly curated weekly collection of topics and opinions that will hopefully add some momentum to the [Digital Ethics](#) conversation.

I am always interested in your opinion so please feel free to [ping me anytime](#) with comments or feedback.

Live long and prosper!

[Gerd](#)

Zurich / Switzerland

This newsletter is co-created by Futures Agency Curator [Peter Van](#)

Check out my recent [book 'Technology vs Humanity'](#) for more context, now available in 10+ languages

Introduction

Welcome to the third issue of my Digital Ethics Newsletter.

This week, many organisations seem to jump on the Digital Ethics bandwagon, including [McKinsey](#) and the 'elites' at [WEF Davos 2019](#). Although the smooth-talking in public is all about preventing negative consequences for workers, the hidden agenda of exponential change like AI seems to be a lot more about plain-and-simple cost reductions.

"The choice isn't between automation and non-automation," commented [Erik Brynjolfsson](#), the director of M.I.T.'s Initiative on the Digital Economy. "It's between whether you use the technology in a way that creates shared prosperity, or more concentration of wealth."

Another main theme this week was the power-wrestle between Apple, Facebook and Google on the mis-use of data in so called "research" applications. We grouped together the more salient items under a new heading "Facebook: a great case study on digital ethics".

And we also added new headings on "justice" and really "disturbing" developments.

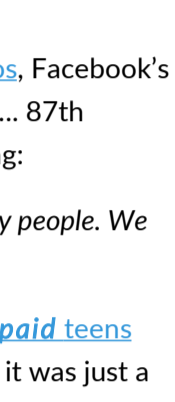
Hope you enjoy the ride; please feel free to share your feedback and input on social media (see links below).

Highlights

Nick Cave on Why AI Will Never Write a Great Song

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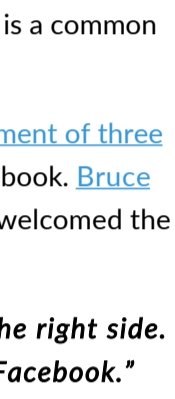
Nick Cave has an opinion on the capacity of AI to write a good song. In [this wonderful article](#), he disagrees with [Yuval Noah Harari](#) who claims in his book [21 Lessons for the 21st Century](#) that AI will soon be able to create music to make you feel in certain ways. Cave's argument is that - although music made by AI may make us feel certain emotions - AI is incapable of creating true 'awe'. I tend to side with Nick



Everything on the Internet is fake, almost

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Turns out, a lot of it, actually. In [this great piece](#), the author claims that everything is fake: metrics, people, businesses, content, politics, and ourselves.



"Fixing that would require cultural and political reform in Silicon Valley and around the world, but it's our only choice. Otherwise we'll all end up on the bot Internet of fake people, fake clicks, fake sites, and fake computers, where the only real thing is the ads."

The Future of the Mind

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About power and responsibility in creating alternate synthetic minds. A philosophical take by Susan Schneider.



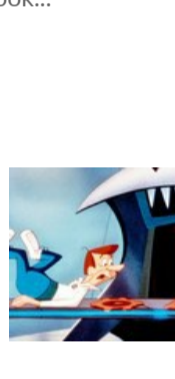
"One thing that worries me about all this is that it's not the AI companies that are settling issues involving the shape of the mind. The future of the mind should be a cultural decision and an individual decision."

Justice and the law

Illinois Court Protects Users' Biometric Privacy

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The Illinois Supreme Court ruled unanimously that when companies collect biometric data like fingerprints or face prints without informed opt-in consent, they can be sued. Users don't need to prove an injury like identity fraud or physical harm—just losing control of one's biometric privacy...



San Francisco wants to ban facial recognition

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A San Francisco lawmaker is introducing legislation that would make the city the first in the nation to ban the government use of facial recognition technology.



Police fines people for covering their faces from facial recognition cameras (and they protest)

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In the UK, police stopped a man for covering his face from facial recognition cameras.



"There was nothing suspicious about him at all ... you have the right to avoid (the cameras), you have the right to cover your face. I think he was exercising his rights."

But when asked for his ID, the man got angry and the police gave him a £90 public order fine for swearing.

Facebook (a 5* case study on digital ethics)

Just one week ago, at the [World Economic Forum in Davos](#), Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg delivered the...oh... 87th iteration of the company's "we are sorry" tune by admitting:

"We did not anticipate all of the risks from connecting so many people. We need to earn back trust."

Just a couple of days later, it was revealed that [Facebook paid teens \(and older people\) to harvest data from their iPhones](#). Oh, it was just a research-app and people consented the use of their data; what could possibly go wrong? Apple thought differently, and took the app from their App Store. Cynically, Facebook is not alone: same happened two days later [with respect to a Google App](#).

Then, on the [15th anniversary of the company](#) - labeled by The Guardian as ["The Death of the Private Self"](#) - Mark Zuckerberg kind-of ignored all, and steered the focus away from Facebook to "the internet", in an attempt to fool us into conflating the two (I hear this is a common problem in many developing countries)

The only positive signal we got this week was [the appointment of three privacy experts](#) that were previously strong critics of Facebook. [Bruce Schneier](#) - world-respected security and privacy expert - welcomed the appointments by [saying](#):

"I know these people. They're ethical, and they're on the right side. I hope they continue to do their good work from inside Facebook."

Despite everything, FB's performance - from a profit and growth perspective - was once again strong, leading to a 10% jump in share price: after all, [2.3 Billion people can't be wrong](#).

[As long as money is everything](#), we'll see more [ethics dumping](#), and a lot more talk than walk when it's about operating a company in the interest of humans and society at large.

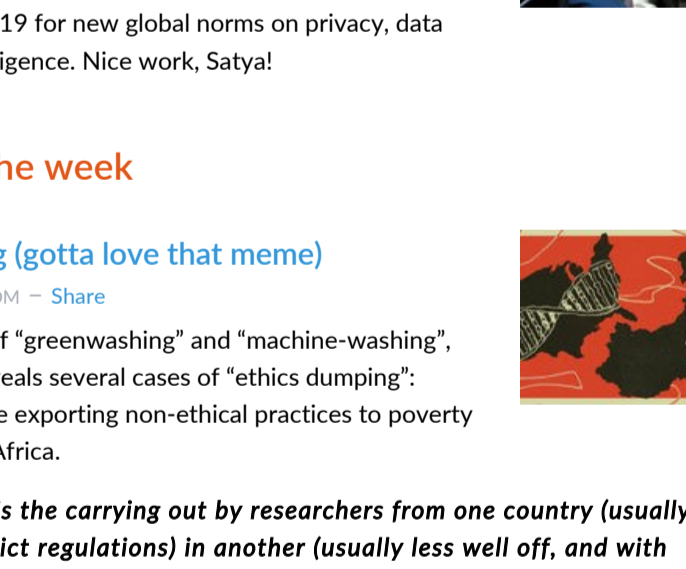
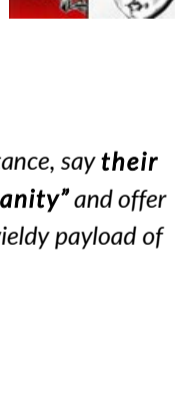
Facebook is clearly a company that needs to be regulated, better sooner than later. But it will [require more than an 40-Expert Board](#).

And yes, my proposal of a [Digital Ethics Council](#) with international authority is percolating (more in that soon)

And here is why I left Facebook in March 2018

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Futurist Gerd Leonhard deletes Facebook



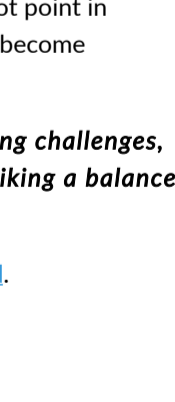
A recent image I like to use when talking about facebook...

Challenges

"No One Is at the Controls" (Nick Bolton)

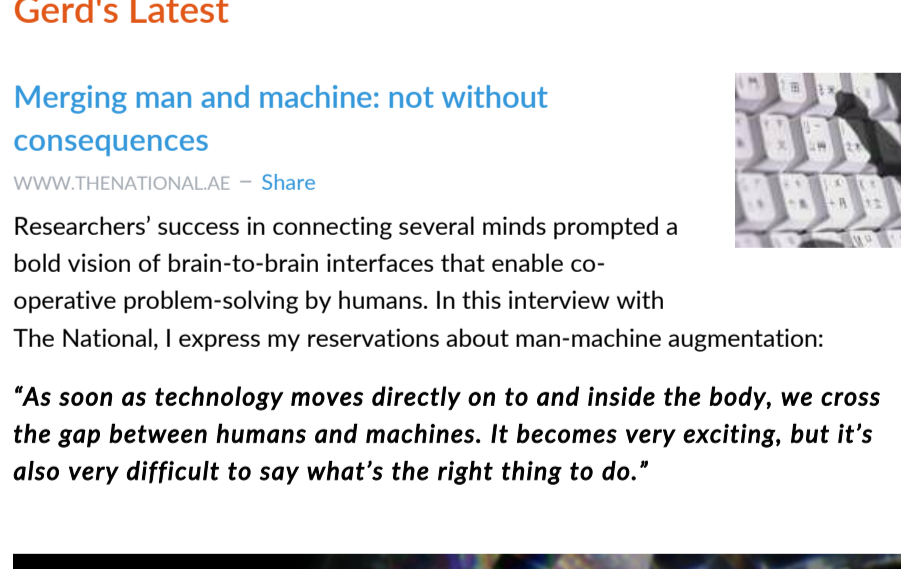
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Sooner than you think, every facet of your life, from the car in your driveway to the lights in your living room, will be ruled by algorithms. This is when we will truly become slaves to the machines, says [Nick Bolton](#) in Vanity Fair.



"At the same time, the randomness of human experience has become constrained. Netflix will recommend a new show you're guaranteed to love, but at what cost?"

"Serendipity, once a totem of the tech lingua franca, has now been hacked. You're certainly not going to try a new restaurant unless an algorithm recommends it. The same products that provide entertaining diversions or make our lives easier also come with hidden costs."



Gerd on: Who will be Mission Control for Humanity?

Technology

Let's put aside moral and ethical issues in human evolution (says Peter Diamandis) |

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Founder/chairman of [XPRIZE](#) Foundation [Peter Diamandis](#) believes we are witnessing the evolution of intelligence.



"...putting aside moral and ethical issues, it's not a matter of if it's going to happen, but when."

"We are shortly going to be in a position to understand what the exact genes are for increasing a person's muscular physiology or cognitive intellect and then editing to achieve what's desired."

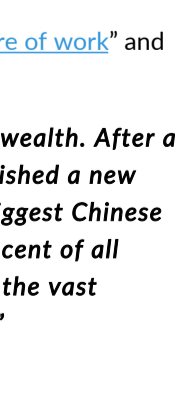
The problem is of course that ignoring the moral and ethical issues, we are in danger of losing what it means to be human.

Industries

Ethical considerations for the insurance business

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Three-quarters of insurance executives believe artificial intelligence will revolutionise the industry within a few years. It promises lower premiums, but brings ethical risks too.



"Some in the industry argue that this is just how markets operate, but when it is facilitated by unprecedented access to personal information, it becomes a highly questionable practice."

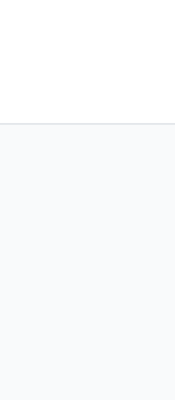
Few however realise that AI will make it possible for insurance companies to create highly personalised risk profiles, and hence are eliminating the need for risk-mitualization. It will lead to a "individual risk-score" where those who live well pay less and those who have bad luck will pay the bill. Think social credit score....

Here is also a [good overview of enterprise adoption of AI](#) in the Insurance sector.

Ethics in Government to be carefully assessed

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More [McKinsey](#) jumping on the AI bandwagon in the public sector: Artificial intelligence can help government agencies solve complex issues. For those that are new at it, here are five factors that can affect the benefits and risks.



"Algorithms should be explainable, especially in the public sector, where myriad stakeholders will review every step."

In ["The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence"](#) McKinsey says that executives and companies should take note of the ethics of artificial intelligence and work to mitigate the potential negative effects.

"We're constantly trying to make these trade-offs between the situations where explainability is important and the situations where performance and accuracy are more important."

Organizations

World Leaders at Davos Call for Global Rules on Tech

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Leaders from Japan, China, Germany and South Africa say that international rules are needed for tech, but there is no consensus on details.

"The rapid spread of digital technology in daily life and the implications that has on the future of work and data security will require more international cooperation, not less, Ms. Merkel said. But she acknowledged that nobody knows how to write the rules. Neither the American nor the Chinese approach would work for Europeans, who place a high value on privacy and social justice, Ms. Merkel said."

A Global Digital Ethics Council?

Reports/Whitepapers

Four principles for Machine Learning

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May 2018 paper by Erik Brynjolfsson, Tom Mitchell and Daniel Rock, who researched measures of "Suitability for Machine Learning" (SML), and found that:

1. Machine Learning (ML) affects different occupations than earlier automation waves
2. Most occupations include at least some SML tasks
3. Few occupations are fully automatable using ML
4. Realizing the potential of ML usually requires redesign of job task content

Disturbing stuff

Latest deepfake of Jennifer Buscemi should seriously frighten you

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Deepfakes - videos in which an individual's face is superimposed onto another—continue to advance at a quickening pace. The video below is complete fake and downright terrifying. It was made by training an AI with high-quality media content of Buscemi layered over Jennifer Lawrence. With the aid of a high-end graphics card and processor, "Jennifer Lawrence-Buscemi" was born.

DIY designer babies without ethics

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What happens if the seams of today join forces? In this dystopian cocktail of cryptocurrency, biohacking, and transhumanism, two guys in a garage are **"starting a company focused on the production of designer babies and human germline genetic engineering."**

"The pitch deck borders on the absurd. The two entrepreneurs, for instance, say their technology's addressable market is "the entire future of humanity" and offer a blueprint for a gene-therapy virus containing what would be an unwieldy payload of genetic instructions."

People

Privacy is a human right, we need a GDPR for the world (says Satya Nadella - Microsoft CEO)

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Against the backdrop of a "techlash", the CEO of Microsoft called at Davos 2019 for new global norms on privacy, data and Artificial Intelligence. Nice work, Satya!

Snippet of the week

Ethics dumping (gotta love that meme)

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In the slipstream of "greenwashing" and "machine-washing", [The Economist](#) reveals several cases of "ethics dumping": Western arrogance exporting non-ethical practices to poverty areas in Asia and Africa.

"Ethics dumping is the carrying out by researchers from one country (usually richer, and with strict regulations) in another (usually less well off, and with laxer laws) of an experiment that would not be permitted at home, or of one that might be permitted, but in a way that would be frowned on."

Podcasts

Podcast about my book Technology vs Humanity: a prologue to the Future (chapter 1)

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I just started a new weekly podcast featuring every chapter in my book [Technology vs Humanity](#).

In the first chapter titled "A Prologue to the Future", I indicate that we are halfway through the century's second decade and at a critical pivot point in technology evolution, a hinge moment when change will not only become combinatory and exponential but inevitable and irreversible.

"Now is our last chance to question the nature of these coming challenges, from artificial intelligence to human genome editing, and striking a balance will be the key."

Subscribe to my podcasts on [Spotify](#), on [iTunes](#) or on [Soundcloud](#).

Meme of the week

The Era of "Move Fast and Break Things" Is Over

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Mark Zuckerberg's **"Move Fast and Break Things"** motto to push out products - irrespective of their impact on their users and society - is becoming untenable. In [this great HBR article](#), the author [Hemant Taneja](#) lists eight questions to better assess the social impact of startups' technology.

"In short, the "move fast and break things" era is over. "Minimum viable products" must be replaced by "minimum viable products"-new offerings that test for the effect on stakeholders and build in guards against potential harms."

Gerd's Latest

Merging man and machine: not without consequences

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Researchers' success in connecting several minds prompted a bold vision of brain-to-brain interfaces that enable co-operative problem-solving by humans. In this interview with The National, I express my reservations about man-machine augmentation:

"As soon as technology moves directly on to and inside the body, we cross the gap between humans and machines. It becomes very exciting, but it's also very difficult to say what's the right thing to do."

Future of humans & machines: are organisms just algorithms?

Smiley

Sophia the robot now has a baby sister

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Not sure it is really funny, but it is at least quite pedantic: Sophia the robot is getting a younger sibling that can walk, talk, sing, play games and, tell jokes - all with creepily life like expression. Her main objective however, is to teach kids

—especially girls—between the ages of seven and 13 about STEM, coding and AI. Curious to know what she teaches about self-driving cars :-)

The need for Digital Ethics for self driving cars

End note

Stories from 2045

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I'm reading ["Stories from 2045: Artificial intelligence and the future of work"](#) and wanted to share this quote with you:

"The most contentious issue was the division of the planet's wealth. After a short but heated debate, the Global Crisis Conference established a new method of taxation and redistribution, under which the 10 biggest Chinese and US data companies, which by then accounted for 63 per cent of all global commerce, voluntarily agreed to pay regular taxes on the vast holdings of data they had harvested from all over the world."

Start reading it for free: <http://a.co/21u3Uxg>

See you next week!

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The Futures Agency, Zurich, Switzerland