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Owning Ethics

‘Doing Ethics’ inside of tech companies

Jacob Metcalf, PhD (Data & Society/PERVADE/Ethical Resolve) @undersequoias

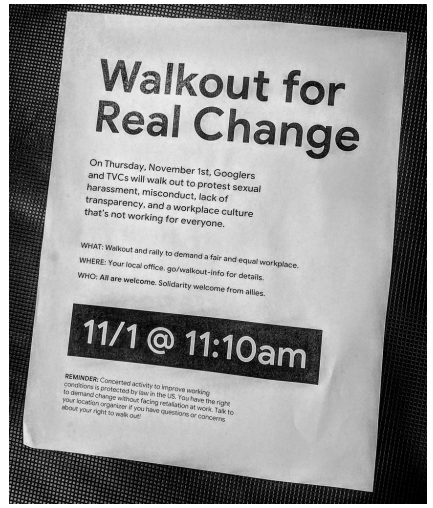
Ethics is the hottest product in Silicon Valley

Metcalf, Jacob & Moss, Emanuel & boyd, danah. "Owning Ethics: Corporate Logics, Silicon Valley, and the Institutionalization of Ethics." Social Research: An International Quarterly, vol. 86 no. 2, 2019, pp. 449-476. Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/732185.

Situating Ethics

Cambridge Analytica

TARGET



Situating Ethics: New Resources

1.

New hires, job titles

Tech companies are hiring high-ranking positions with “ethics” in the job title.

2.

Higher visibility

Ethics panels/workshops/ keynotes at industry conferences are now standard.

3.

Move to implementation

Clear shift in conversation from arguing ”ethics is important” to establishing concrete practices.

Situating Ethics: Skepticism from ethicists

Methodology

Methodology

- Ethnography
- Textual Sources
- 20+ interviews with “Data Owners”

Silicon Valley Logics

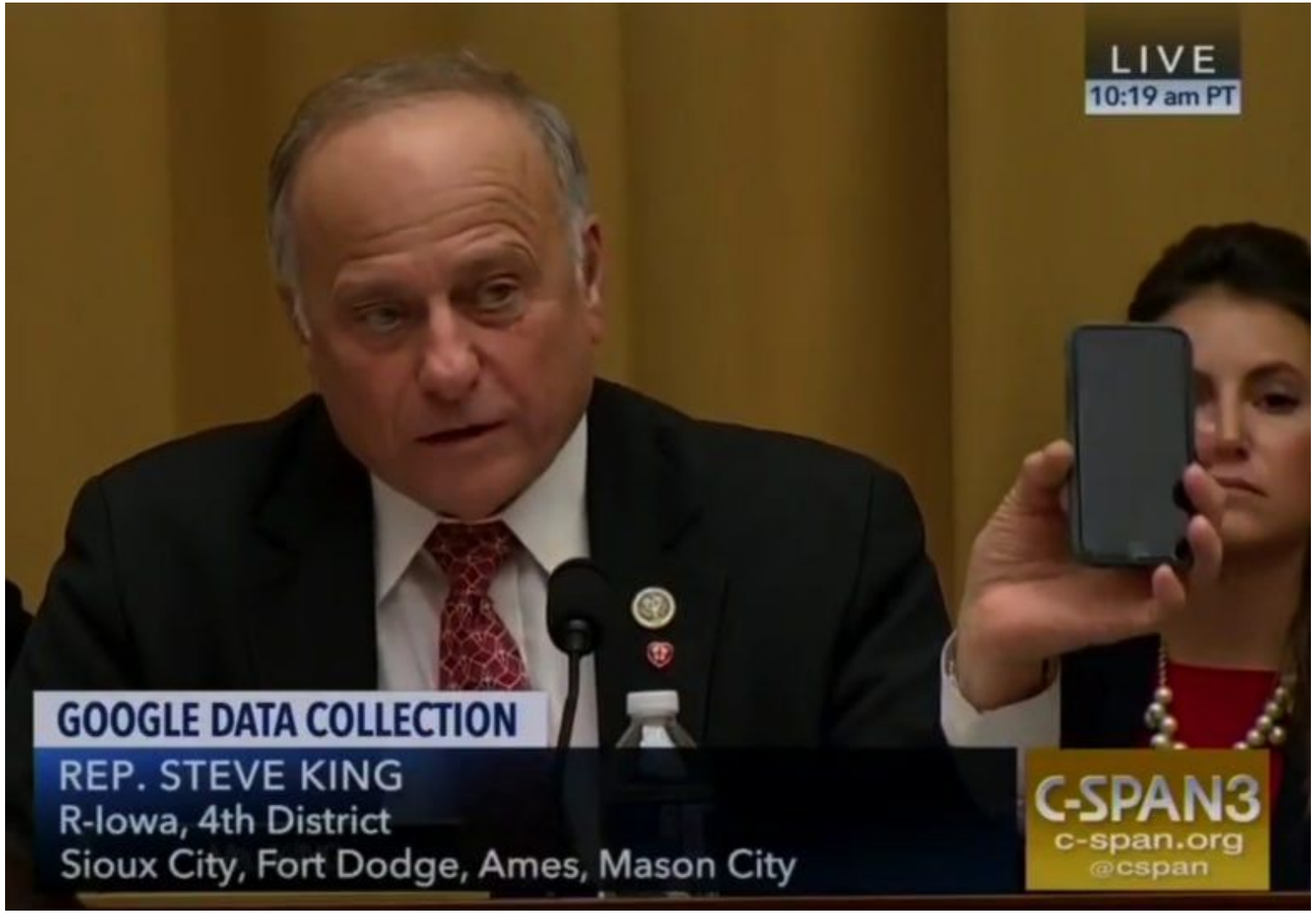
Silicon Valley Logics

- Meritocracy
- Technological Solutionism
- Market Fundamentalism

Meritocracy

“There are really good people working in all these companies that try to do the right thing”

Meritocracy



Meritocracy

AI at Google: our principles

Sundar Pichai
CEO

Published Jun 7, 2018

At its heart, AI is computer programming that learns and adapts. It can't solve every problem, but its potential to improve our lives is profound. At Google, we use AI to make products more useful—from email that's spam-free and easier to compose, to a digital assistant you can speak to naturally, to photos that pop the fun stuff out for you to enjoy.

Beyond our products, we're using AI to help people tackle urgent problems. A pair of high school students are building AI-powered sensors to predict the risk of wildfires. Farmers are using it to monitor the health of their herds. Doctors are starting to use AI to help diagnose cancer and prevent blindness. These clear benefits are why Google invests heavily in AI research and development, and makes AI technologies widely available to others via our tools and open-source code.

We recognize that such powerful technology raises equally powerful questions about its use. How AI is developed and used will have a significant impact on society for many years to come. As a leader in AI, we feel a deep responsibility to get this right. So today, we're announcing seven principles to guide our work going forward. These are not theoretical concepts; they are concrete standards that will actively govern our research and product development and will impact our business decisions.

We acknowledge that this area is dynamic and evolving, and we will approach our work with humility, a commitment to internal and external engagement, and a willingness to adapt our approach as we learn over time.

“Technical people are really interested in technical solutions”

Technological Solutionism

Market Fundamentalism

“The system you create has add value … if it is a roadblock that has no value, people literally won’t do it — because they don’t have to”

Lessons from Organizational Sociology

Blinkered Isomorphism

Horse Blinkers | by Alex E. Proimos

Normalizing Ethical Mishaps

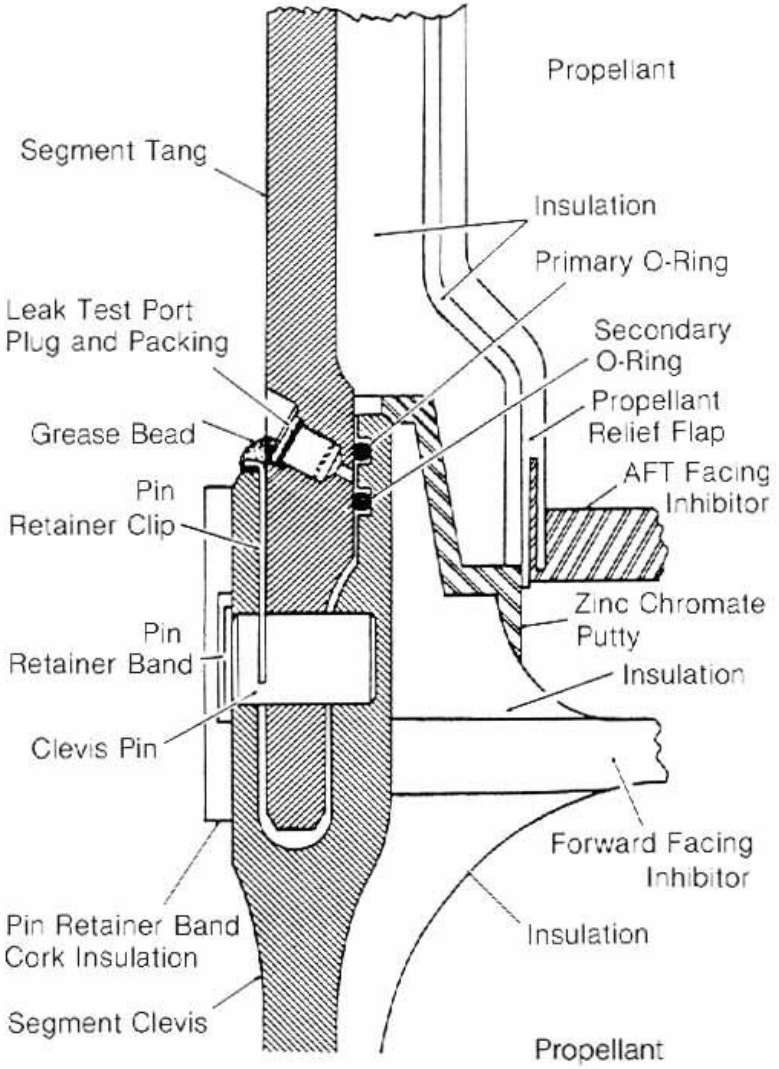


Figure 14
Solid Rocket Motor cross section shows positions of tang, clevis and O-rings. Putty lines the joint on the side toward the propellant.

Key Tensions

Key Tensions

- Internal vs. External
- Upside vs. Downside
- B2B vs. B2C vs. Hardware
- Product vs. Legal
- Individual vs. Corporate

Internal vs. External

“I don't think there are enough people talking about ethics in the tech industry… There are people who are impacted by technology who talk about the tradeoffs of technology and how it has affected their lives or their communities… [But, the vast majority of people in tech] are not yet moved by ethics.”

Upside vs. Downside

“One is that there is often a perception that challenges we face are singular values, and actually there's often different values that come into play. So certainly with [our platform], the conversations that we would have around content removal requests from a government weighed against the risk of the entire platform being blocked in that country—there's a value of free expression there, there's a value of an open internet there—they are in tension. We want to protect our users' voices, but at what price would you protect one user's voice if it risks every other user in the country losing their voice?”

B2B vs. B2C vs. Hardware vs. Consulting

“Customer success is a key value, when we talk about customer success, we talk about the success of our customers' customers, right, but at the same time, we're a layer removed from that and we are by definition a layer removed from visibility into some forms of how the product is being used… We have to be very, very curious about, "Okay, what are the hypothetical use cases in which something might be abused or where we can sort of predict that there is kind of risk coming out of it?"”

Product vs. Legal

“And just as I put the work that [Product Safety] and [Policy] and Legal do—it puts us in a better place as a starting point, but I think you're right that organizationally engineering culture is not always—"not receptive" is the wrong word, but I would say that it's not always a straightforward fit for those frameworks within an engineering culture about how do you sort of operationalize this. Some of the questions that we get asked a lot are, "Okay, but how would you measure success or failure for these things?" I'm like, "Well, success is that nothing horrible happens." How you measure a counterfactual in a satisfying way? You're not really sure. But I think as the industry has matured and evolved, I think people are finding it more straightforward to grok some of the consequences for not doing this work”

Individual vs. Corporate

“[tech company employees] are incentivized by revenue generated; by launching things; by user engagement like clicks, how long somebody spends on a particular site or app”, [all of which are] ”really about metrics going back to the stockholder — how much value are we adding to our stock and to the stockholder? — and values aren’t based on what are we doing that’s positive in the world despite whatever values or mottos the individual companies may have.”

Ethics as Organizational Capacity

Where should "ethics" live inside of corporate structures?

- **Legal vs HR vs Product Design vs Data Science/Research**
- **CEO vs CTO vs CIO**
- **SME vs TPM vs SVP**

How should "ethics" be incentivized?

- **OKR (Objective Key Result)**
- **KPI (Key Performance Indicator)**
- **Regulatory requirements**

What skillsets are needed?

Situating ethics in the regulatory landscape

The Legislation That Targets the Racist Impacts of Tech

A proposed law would make big companies determine whether their algorithms discriminate, but it's lacking in some big ways.

By Margot E. Kaminski and Andrew D. Selbst

Ms. Kaminski is a law professor and Mr. Selbst is a postdoctoral scholar.

May 7, 2019

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Algorithmic Accountability Act

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. WYDEN (for himself and Mr. BOOKER) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on _____

A BILL

To direct the Federal Trade Commission to require entities that use, store, or share personal information to conduct automated decision system impact assessments and data protection impact assessments.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2019".

SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.

In this Act:

Algorithmic Impact Report

- Account for the negative consequences of an automated system and identify necessary mitigation techniques.
- Explicitly modeled on Environmental Impact Report (for better or worse)
- Norms will evolve in relationship between tech companies and administrative state
- Public and contestable
- Tied to procurement processes
- Amenable to established legal norms around disparate impact

HUD's Disparate Impact Rule

Housing Secretary Ben Carson appears in Baltimore in July. // Julio Cortez/AP

How HUD Could Dismantle a Pillar of Civil Rights Law

KRISTON CAPPS AUG 16, 2019

The Department of Housing and Urban Development plans to revise the "disparate impact" rule, which could fundamentally reshape federal fair housing enforcement.

Regulatory Landscape

HUD

- Distributes liability/responsibility away from the system user and toward third-party/platform owner
- Does not require proactive reporting
- Disincentivizes building out accountability practices/investing in capacity to study outcomes

AAA

- Distributes liability/responsibility toward covered entities that use automated decision systems
- Requires proactive reporting
- Incentivizes building out accountability practices/investing in capacity to study outcomes

Where to from here?

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Thank you

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