The Adbot's Dilemma: Examining Ethics in AI Advertising

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is one of many highly polarized technologies currently swirling in the forefront of the public mind. Some parties view AI as humanity's saving grace, "more profound than… electricity or fire" (Clifford), while others see it as a harbinger of doom, bringing with it images of robot overlords and dystopian wrecks. In the face of such varied outlooks, the overarching point that virtually all parties agree upon is that AI is extremely powerful in its ability to control our online experiences. More and more, the average person encounters their day through an increasingly mediated digital environment, and if these experiences are controlled by AI there are certainly questions raised about the underlying guiding ethics, or lack thereof. Thus, in this paper I argue that fears concerning AI's control over online experiences are justified given the inability to categorize machines as moral agents, as demonstrated by AI in digital advertising.

In order for a machine to be held morally accountable for a situation it must be considered "aware, intentional… and responsible for the outcome" (Shank and DeSanti 408) The general public is much more likely to attribute responsibility to an AI than they are awareness or intentionality (Shank and DeSanti 405), begging the question if the conclusion can exist without the premises. The more an algorithm is explained the more likely someone is to assign blame to it, as morality is naturally associated with complex agents (Shank and DeSanti 407).

Though the general public is quick to attribute moral qualities to machines, this does not render their judgement true. Consider the AI software designed to judge an international beauty contest that selected almost exclusively light-skinned winners, receiving backlash and a label of "racist" from the general public (Shank and DeSanti 401). Yet the software in question did not spring from divine creation with the prerogative of shunning people of colour. The AI, given its proximity to the moral event in question, shielded the other circumstances of its creation, such as the software developers and the company implementing the algorithm, who (one would hope unintentionally) built into the machine a racial bias. Given the current limitations of technology, the average AI software is not capable of autonomously making decisions in the face of what it understands to be a moral dilemma (Misselhorn 164). This issue crops up frequently in the development of modern AI – a clear example can be seen in the immense difficulties in

developing a single set of rules for self-driving car ethics (Maxmen). Thus, it is not the AI itself, but rather the people behind the AI who determine how it reacts in what one would perceive to be a moral situation.

If one takes into consideration that software developers are effectively an AI's moral compass, one must ask if this inspires much confidence, especially in profit-driven circumstances. Consider, for example, the tendency of software developers to implement what is referred to as dark pattern design. This is when a user experience is designed in an intentionally misleading way, with the objective of tricking the user, often into spending more money than desired (Lewis 99). This practice hardly indicates a deep concern over online ethics, making it difficult to imagine the courtesy being extended to AI – indeed, Google dissolved their own AI ethics committee a mere week after implementing it (Statt). These cast into doubt the ability for immoral (or at the very least amoral) developers to create moral machines.

How, though, does this lack of morality manifest in a way that affects the average internet user? Back in the 20th century there was a now charmingly quaint concept, termed the adman's dilemma, that outlined the moral predicaments advertisers faced in balancing the deceit necessary to sell a product with the innate feeling that one ought to tell the truth, or as much of it as possible (Rutherford 6). Unfortunately – but perhaps not surprisingly – this is not a sentiment that has lasted in the progression of the field of advertising. Artificial intelligence has become the driving force behind the advertising industry, algorithmically propelled by the desire to produce profit (Qin and Jiang 338). AI advertising is characterized by its data mining – its ability to generate incredibly detailed and individualized profiles of consumers – as well as its efficiency (Qin and Jiang 343-344). Once it is set into motion by its software developers, the algorithms work towards maximum profit, however those parameters have been set.

Unfortunately, the preceding demonstration of AI's inability to make moral decisions leads programs to advertise in decidedly tasteless ways. Consider the Facebook algorithm that developed a variety of new advertising demographics based on user activity, including "people who hate Jews" and "people who want to know how to burn Jews" (Tufekci). Or the post-promotion algorithm that proliferated the spread of fake news during the 2016 American presidential election, purportedly leading not only to a misinformed voting population, but to

direct real-world violence – for example, "Pizzagate" – simply because it generated the most interaction, so it surely must be desirable (Madrigal).

In this way, AI proves to be a guiding hand behind everyday experiences of the internet, yet one driven completely by profit and incapable of moral judgement, certainly a concept with sinister connotations. One wonders how we can idly sit by letting something with no morals – something that believes "people who love knitting" and "people who hate Jews" carry the same value – control our interactions within the digitally mediated environment that we now largely call home. One can only try to consume internet content critically, and hope that perhaps the individuals behind these programs carry in their hearts something other than their own best interests.

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