

CASE STUDY 8: AI IN HISTORIC PHOTO ASSESSMENT

In recent years, artificial intelligence has helped many companies become more efficient, profitable, accurate, and organized.

However, as artificial intelligence is gaining popularity and certain controversial problematic situations have occurred, some have begun to question the ethical issues and dilemmas that these new technologies impose. Particularly troubling is the way companies prioritize profit over ethical concerns and the well-being of society when it comes to artificial intelligence.

For instance, the artificial intelligence of Facebook and other social media sites is learning everything about a person to be able to give each person the content that will be most interesting, even if that content is conspiracy theories, violence, and other negative topics that would be harmful to this person and the society in general. There are also less severe cases where artificial intelligence is used to maximize companies' profits at the expense of society, for example, JLM Historic Photos, as later discussed in the case.

BACKGROUND

Some companies are using artificial intelligence to learn what is currently popular and ongoing in society around the world, thus being able to predict what will be profitable for a certain company to promote and sell goods and services.

In many cases, artificial intelligence's training data is the whole internet, which could be problematic because on the internet aside from valuable information one can also find offensive, racist, and sexist language, where inappropriate content is often amplified and normalized.

There are ethical concerns about how artificial intelligence will distinguish "right" from "wrong", "appropriate" from "inappropriate". What is racist, and what is sexist? What about ambiguous social concepts such as cultural appropriation (when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way), which is a very debatable issue in many cases? For example, while some people think that white people should not have dreadlocks because they originated in black culture, and by having them, white people are appropriating another culture, which is disrespectful to that culture, others argue that Vikings also had dreadlocks. Therefore, it should not be considered as cultural appropriation. If people cannot agree on many social issues, how is artificial intelligence supposed to understand and come to a definitive conclusion about what is appropriate?

Another issue in this regard is the historical context. How will artificial intelligence consider the historical context, which is the setting in which a historical event, idea, or object takes place and includes the social, economic, cultural, and political influences that shape the idea or the event? A company called JLM Historic Photos has recently faced such challenges.

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JLM Historic Photos

JLM Historic Photos is a company that sells historic photographs to customers all over the world. The company states that “we are strongly involved in preserving history and helping archives around the world in digitizing their physical images, photos, or prints”.

The conversion process is a win-win situation as the archives receive the digitized formats and still get to preserve the historic photographs, while JLM Historic Photos sells the original pictures to whoever is interested in owning and caring for such valuable artifacts. The company was founded as a picture agency in 1946; however, it started selling actual original vintage photographs to a global clientele in 2013.

The company has digitalized and, therefore, owns more than 20,000 pictures. It is difficult and time-consuming for the company's employees to understand which photos should be promoted on their website and social media accounts and, therefore, which pictures will be most profitable to sell out of the 20,000 pictures. Therefore, in recent years, the company JLM Historic Photos began to use artificial intelligence to understand worldwide trends and preferences by analyzing the content on the internet to figure out which pictures they should promote on their website, social media accounts, and other channels that are at JLM Historic Photos disposal.

Some of the photos that the artificial intelligence algorithm chose for the company to promote and sell have created some controversy and backlash from their customers and followers on social media platforms.

For instance, one photo recommended by the artificial intelligence was a picture of a World War II parade happening in the streets of New York after the soldiers were returning back home to the United States after beating the Nazis. One of the soldiers in this parade was so thrilled to be back home after the war that during this parade, he grabbed a woman and kissed her while the crowd was cheering. The photographer at this parade captured this moment that many thought was beautiful. To this day, many people consider this picture to be beautiful, symbolizing a historic day and excitement of American soldiers returning back home after the war had ended.

However, in “the age of” the Me Too movement (Me Too movement, awareness movement around the issue of sexual harassment and sexual abuse of women in the workplace that grew to prominence in 2017 in response to news reports of sexual abuse by American film producer Harvey Weinstein), many people began to criticize JLM Historic Photos for promoting this picture and selling it because the woman in this photo, whom the soldier grabbed, clearly showed signs of resistance and did not give her consent to be kissed. People began to debate the body language of this woman, which seemed to indicate resistance from her side and the force that the soldier took to kiss this young woman, supposedly against her will.

The company JLM Historic Photos explained that the company's artificial intelligence chose this photo as one of the most potentially popular photos of their 20,000 photo archives, but this answer was not good enough for the company's followers on social media, who argued for taking down the photo and were demanding an apology from the company.

This is not the only instance where company JLM Historic Photos has fallen into a situation where a potentially popular and profitable photo marking something beautiful also has the potential to insult and offend some people, and the company will have to issue an apology. Situations like these beg to ask the company how their artificial intelligence program is being run and what factors the algorithm considers when deciding which pictures to chose for promotion and sales. Is it strictly based on popularity and trends on the internet? That could be worrisome, considering how much racism, sexism, homophobia, and overall negativity are out there on the internet.

Ethical Considerations

Insulting Content

Cases such as these create an interesting debate of who decides what is appropriate and what is not; what is insulting and offensive and what is not; what is sexist, racist, homophobic, and what is not. It is difficult for people to figure out some of these issues and answer these questions; therefore, is it reasonable to trust technology, algorithms, and artificial intelligence to understand all of this and to never insult any social group with its decisions?

While it is unknown how the JLM Historic Photos artificial intelligence algorithm is set up, by using logic and basic intelligence, it is a fairly good guess to say that it uses the internet as its data to understand worldwide trends and current interests. Considering that this might be the case, is it accurate to say that artificial intelligence is essentially a mirror of society and will reflect back to us who we are and what we put on the internet?

Transparency

As mentioned, it is unclear how the artificial intelligence program is set up at JLM Historic Photos, which raises questions of transparency. It is the case with many companies and their artificial intelligence, where they will often point to the “black box” as something that is beyond human comprehension and, therefore, is impossible to explain or even understand.

However, an argument could easily be made that in order to fix something, we must first understand it, and therefore, companies must be much more transparent when it comes to artificial intelligence. If you ask a certain well-known artificial intelligence program to write an essay of why the earth is flat, it will do so because it is mining data from the whole internet and the internet has a lot of misinformation, conspiracies and harmful content that should be avoided when it comes to artificial intelligence and its deep learning mechanisms.

Profit Over Ethics

It is hard to figure out all the consequences that will be produced when we, as a society and companies, trust artificial intelligence to carry out many tasks. On the one hand, companies benefit from artificial intelligence doing things more efficiently by saving time and company resources, but on the other hand, it could land the company in the middle of controversy where the company in question has to issue an apology and the reputation and the trust from customers is either harmed or in worst cases ruined. Then again, these situations make people talk about the company, and JLM Historic Photos got media attention and popularity, proving that there is no such thing as bad publicity, but in any case, this is a question of ethical company practice.

Mitigating Risks

1. AI Content Labels

Concerning the issue of insulting some social groups. Companies could put a label on the content that this image is generated, chosen, or recommended by artificial intelligence. Therefore, there is a higher chance that people will not be insulted because it is more difficult to be angry at an algorithm or technology than it is at a human being and their decision-making.

2. External Oversight

Regarding the transparency of artificial intelligence, an argument could be made that companies must be regulated when it comes to artificial intelligence. After all, we don't trust companies to regulate themselves when it comes to pollution or taxes. Why would we trust them to self-regulate themselves when it comes to artificial intelligence?

3. Consumer Pressure

Concerning the issue of prioritizing profit over ethics, many companies will always do that, but the public must be more vocal about wrongdoing on behalf of some company and demand change of the particular companies business practices to make the company understand that they might lose customers if they continue to prioritize efficiency and profit with no regard to ethical concerns.

Case Study 8: Questions for Reflection

1. Who should decide what is ethical to promote? Suppose it is difficult for people to understand what is ethical and what is not. Is it reasonable to ask technology, algorithms, and artificial intelligence to understand ethics and never to insult any social group?

2. Is it accurate to say that when artificial intelligence is learning about a society by using the internet and then presenting content to that society, it is essentially a mirror of society and will reflect back to us who we are and what we put on the internet?

3. Should companies be regulated when it comes to creating and using artificial intelligence programs and algorithms? Which government agencies should be tasked with regulating artificial intelligence tools created by the companies, and how would that procedure be implemented?

