

Ethics Check: Pre-Reading

Creating with Purpose

AI is Already Making Decisions About You

Let's start with getting a job. Many companies - especially large ones - don't have a human being read your resume first. An AI system reads it and decides whether you even make it to the next round. And here's the problem: if that model was trained on historical hiring data from a company that mostly hired from certain schools, or certain zip codes, or certain backgrounds - the model learned those patterns. It might reject a fully qualified candidate because they went to a school the model hasn't "seen" before, or because their name sounds unfamiliar. No one intended that. But it happens.

Now look at healthcare. AI tools are used to help doctors diagnose illness, predict which patients might be at risk for certain diseases, and recommend treatments. That sounds great - until you realize that a lot of medical AI was trained mostly on data from one type of patient. So when the same tool is used on someone from a different demographic group, it performs worse. That's not a hypothetical.

There's documented research showing that certain diagnostic AI tools were less accurate for patients with darker skin tones because the training data skewed toward lighter skin. That's a real consequence.

What about music and creative tools? A lot of you are probably already using AI tools to generate images, music, or videos. Here's something worth thinking about: those tools were trained on existing human creative work - often scraped from the internet, often without asking the original creators for permission. So when you use a tool

that generates music "in the style of" a particular artist, you're benefiting from that artist's labor. The question of who deserves credit - and who gets paid - is very much unresolved.

Games and recommendations - this one you probably feel in your daily life. Game matchmaking, your YouTube feed, your TikTok algorithm, your Spotify recommendations - all AI. These systems are optimizing for one thing above everything else: engagement.

Keeping you watching, playing, scrolling. That's not inherently evil, but it can mean the algorithm pushes content that keeps you hooked rather than content that's actually good for you. That's a design choice baked into the model.

Finally, criminal justice. Some courtrooms in the United States use AI tools to predict whether a defendant is likely to reoffend in the future - and those predictions influence sentencing and parole decisions. A study called the COMPAS investigation found that one of these tools flagged Black defendants as higher risk at nearly twice the rate of white defendants, even when controlling for other factors. That's not a minor bug - that's a system that affects whether someone goes home or stays in prison.

So when we talk about AI ethics - we're not talking about something abstract or philosophical. We're talking about real decisions, affecting real people, right now. And increasingly, you're the ones who will be building these systems.

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