BUSINESS, HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The NOVA BHRE Blog

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Improving social impact in digital and technology

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This blog post is based on the interventions of Howard Pyle in the webinar on Corporate Due Diligence and Digital Transformation organised as part of the First Annual Conference of the Nova Centre on Business, Human Rights and the Environment with the support of PLMJ, the Portuguese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, CEDIS, as well as NOVA 4 The Globe on the 24th of November 2021.

About the author: Howard Pyle has led digital transformation and design programs for both large global organizations and startups throughout his 20+ year career. He founded ExperienceFutures.org, a social impact organization aimed at leveling the playing field in our digital lives through new approaches to digital experience and design powered by ML/AI platforms. Howard was previously SVP of CX & Design at MetLife where he led the global brand design, UX, and digital experience platforms. Before joining MetLife, Howard led a network of design studios at IBM and developer marketing. He was previously a Senior Partner at OgilvyOne and founded digital startups.

What has to change within organizations to ensure that AI, Machine Learning and other innovations create more equity?

I'm approaching this topic as somebody who has made digital experiences, digital platforms, products, and applications for my entire career. I want to believe that I've been socially conscious and acting ethically in that capacity, but realized over time that my field builds solutions that amplify existing privilege. The way digital tools are made for individuals, especially in the private sector, is fundamentally built around the idea that users already know how to use those tools and applications. If you know how websites and mobile apps work in general, then you'll have an easier time with any new tool you need to use. Another way to say this is that every digital experience you interact with, is fundamentally designed for digital privilege. That means that as you build digital tools and invest in digital transformation, you expect users to be more and more and more digitally savvy to meet your agenda around digital transformation. This amplifies existing cultural, legal, and economic inequities.

There are many examples of this in the US. One of the things that we see is, for example, is that students in households that make less than $30,000 a year largely don't have access to laptops or desktops computers, which means they don't have access to financial aid or college applications since they largely don't work on mobile phones. Classic thinking on the digital divide says we resolve that problem by shipping them a laptop. However, academics talk about a second layer of the digital divide – focused on design access, content access, and cognitive access. Simply put, that means designing front-end experiences that work for the needs of the individual regardless of ability, economic status, age, or other factors that restrict access. Unfortunately, this isn't the orientation of many organizations, yet.

Having a background in both product design and technology, I see where organizations can begin to use machine learning and artificial intelligence platforms to generate new web applications, mobile apps, and designs customized to the needs of the individual. This could be used to ensure that the language is less jargon-filled for an older audience. Or to optimize complex tools into mobile-optimized experiences for people who lack the economic status to own a laptop computer.

The starting point is that most organizations engaged in digital transformation don't define who their diverse users are and therefore can't create solutions that meet their needs. Because of that, most websites and apps are created to meet the needs of the most valuable (and often most privileged) individuals. There is a fiction within the design and technology community that one version of an application or website should work for everyone. This idea has to be upended. Artificial intelligence and machine learning can help accelerate different versions of experiences for each user.

Part of what we work on at ExperienceFutures.org is creating new approaches, processes, and tools that help organizations focus on ethics for the designs they publish. Board members like Amit Sen bring essential expertise – he partners closely with us to help integrate human rights principles coming out of his experience with the UN High Commission on Human Rights.

In this series with NOVA, one of the speakers talked about new rights in an algorithm society. I think that this is a vital and really interesting topic. To a certain degree, what happens when you rush digitalization in the private sector is a collapse of the social safety net. Somehow, we believe that corporate capitalism should keep up with the needs of users when they're making financially driven decisions to shutter stores in underprivileged communities in favor of solutions that are online only. Are they factoring in who is left behind in these strategies?

And suppose those organizations are also bad at making digital experiences – as many are. In that case, the social safety net erodes online as well, when access to things like healthcare, financial management and education all slip away. This is because those private sector organizations don't prioritize diverse users online the same way they would in the traditional channels. For example, all banks would ensure that their branches are accessible to people with disabilities, yet many of them don't provide basic support for disabilities online.

The thing we're most concerned about is making sure there's parity between our digital lives and the real-world access within finance, government, legal systems, education, and health care. As digital transformation accelerates, every organization must ensure that people have the same support for their abilities in their spaces online, and off. That's just the starting point of "do no harm" – what follows should be radically improving access to underprivileged users through evolving experiences and new technology.

This ties back to the idea of exploring new rights in the AI era.

In the end, I do believe technology and machine learning will fundamentally impact digital rights in the coming years. The technology won't solve this for us, its up to each organization (as maker or adopters) to create its own definition of ethics and equity in the digital experiences they create. Still, it starts with a mindset shift, and a focus on sustainability. Any community that is thinking about human rights and helping shift into ethical territories will need to help the digital makers and technology companies set the bar for the experiences they're creating. There's a lot of work to be done in digital rights and equity before you even begin dealing with the underlying design and technology.

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