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New Toolkit Shows Companies How to Anticipate, Prevent Bad Actors from Using Tech in Harmful Ways

With concerns about bad actors using technology to sow discord and a growing backlash against tech companies, data collection and privacy issues, Institute for the Future and Omidyar Network have developed a set of tools tech entrepreneurs, founders and CEOs can use to anticipate how their technologies could be used for malicious purposes in the future and counteract it

Aug. 7, 2018, Palo Alto, Calif.—The [Institute for the Future](#) (IFTF) and [Omidyar Network](#) today released a toolkit designed to help technologists envision the potential risks and worst-case scenarios of how their technologies may be used in the future so they can anticipate issues and design and implement ethical solutions from the outset. The [Ethical OS Toolkit Or: How Not to Regret the Things You Will Build](#) is already being piloted by nearly 20 tech companies, schools and start-ups, including Mozilla, Techstars, and others.

The toolkit provides technologists with information about the new risks they should be paying attention to as well as choices they can make to safeguard users, communities, society and their own companies. It was designed by IFTF's Jane McGonigal, a renowned expert in collaborative foresight and human interaction and Samuel Woolley, director of IFTF's Digital Intelligence Lab. Raina Kumra, entrepreneur in residence at Omidyar Network's Tech and Society Solutions Lab, provided insight during the toolkit's development ensuring it's useful to the kinds of technology companies Omidyar Network invests in and advises.

“The future is like a game. We have to play it to see how it turns out. But if we wait until the future actually happens, it's too late to shape it or change our strategies for a better outcome,” McGonigal said. “But we can play it in advance. Our goal is to engage tens of thousands of tech workers in anticipating the long-term impacts of what they're building today, so they can use that foresight to make better, more ethical choices now.”

Institute for the Future and Omidyar Network's [Tech and Society Solutions Lab](#) are working with key tech companies, academics, product managers and others to get this toolkit into the hands of technologists.

“Building a startup takes a lot more than just funding,” said [Cody Simms](#), partner at Techstars. “At Techstars, we are building a worldwide network that helps entrepreneurs succeed. Helping founders anticipate future ethical challenges that their technologies could encounter or incite is critical to their ultimate success. We’re thrilled to be working with Omidyar Network and the Institute for the Future on this initiative and to help our global network of more than 1,500 startups get ahead of problems before they happen.”

What’s in the toolkit:

- Fourteen areas where unintended consequences bearing major social impact may emerge.
 - Technologists are presented with 14 “risky futures” scenarios where they can imagine various risky situations that could arise because of new technologies. They include scenarios where video-faking algorithms are so advanced that faked videos are impossible to distinguish from real footage (allowing anyone to manufacture video “proof” to back up any claim); or where data companies offer free health insurance to anyone who agrees to install a smart toilet in their home and submit its data—which can include detection of stress hormones, infectious disease, alcohol and drug use and more—to the company.
- A checklist of eight risk zones where hard-to-anticipate *and* unwelcome consequences are most likely to emerge. Most tech is designed with the best intentions. But once a product is released and reaches scale, all bets are off.
- Seven future-proofing strategies that help technologists prioritize identified risks, determine what the biggest and hardest to address threats are, and where to begin to develop strategies that will help mitigate those risks.

“Most people create technology with the hope that it will make the world a better place, but our best intentions must incorporate actionable safeguards to ensure others don’t corrupt our ideas along the way,” Woolley added. “This toolkit helps anyone creating new technology contemplate worst-case scenarios and familiarize themselves with major areas of potential risk. As the unexpected high-jacking by Russian hackers of Facebook and Twitter during the 2016 election showed, considering unexpected risks is a must for the entire tech community. Our collective future will be the better for it.”

“As makers of tech become more mindful of the unintended effects of their products and services have upon society, we saw a need for a practical toolkit and easy to apply framework for learning, discussion and eventually better products with fewer potential downsides,” added [Raina Kumra](#). “Something as simple as a checklist can be a real game changer in product today.”

Feedback on the Ethical OS toolkit and inquiries regarding trainings and workshops related to the toolkit are encouraged by contacting ideas@ethicalos.org. Join the conversation on Twitter using the hashtag #EthicalOS.

Omidyar Network's [Tech and Society Solutions Lab](#) draws on Omidyar Network's long-standing belief in the promise of technology to create opportunity and social good, as well as the concern about unintended consequences that can result from technological innovation. The team aims to help technologists prevent, mitigate, and correct societal downsides of technology—and maximize positive impact.

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About Institute for the Future

Institute for the Future (IFF) is celebrating its 50th anniversary as the world's leading non-profit strategic futures organization. The core of our work is identifying emerging discontinuities that will transform global society and the global marketplace. We provide organizations with insights into business strategy, design process, innovation, and social dilemmas. Our research spans a broad territory of deeply transformative trends, from health and health care to technology, the workplace, and human identity. IFF is based in Palo Alto, California. For more, visit www.iff.org.