

Harvard, MIT to teach tech ethics

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California, 13 February

The medical profession has an ethic: First, do no harm. Silicon Valley has an ethos: Build it first and ask for forgiveness later.

Now, in the wake of fake news and other troubles at tech companies, universities that helped produce some of Silicon Valley's top technologists are hustling to bring a more medicine-like morality to computer science.

This semester, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) are jointly offering a new course on the ethics and regulation of artificial intelligence. The University of Texas at Austin just introduced a course titled "Ethical Foundations of Computer Science" — with the idea of eventually requiring it for all computer science majors.

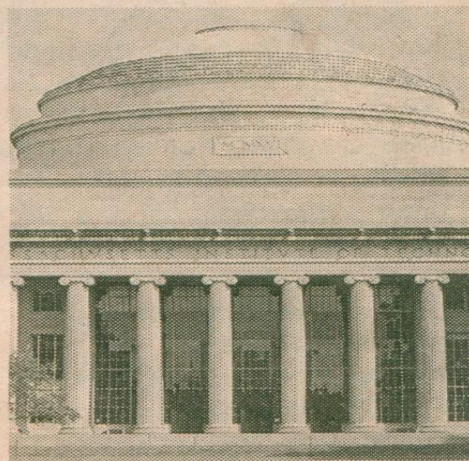
And at Stanford University, the academic heart of the industry, three professors and a research fellow are developing a computer science ethics course for next year. They hope several hundred students will enroll.

The idea is to train the next generation of technologists and policymakers to consider the ramifications of innovations — like autonomous weapons or self-driving cars — before those products go on sale.

"It's about finding or identifying issues that we know in the next two, three, five, 10 years, the students who graduate from here are going to have to grapple with," said Mehran Sahami, a popular computer science professor at Stanford who is helping to develop the course. He is renowned on campus for bringing Mark Zuckerberg to class.

"Technology is not neutral," said Professor Sahami, who formerly worked at Google as a senior research scientist. "The choices that get made in building technology then have social ramifications."

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— fake news on Facebook, fake followers on Twitter, lewd children's videos on YouTube — of the industry's build-it-first mind-set. They amount to an open challenge to a common Silicon Valley attitude that has generally dismissed ethics as a hindrance.

"We need to at least teach people that there's a dark side to the idea that you should move fast and break things," said Laura Norén, a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Data Science at New York University who began teaching a new data science ethics course this semester. "You can patch the software, but you can't patch a person if you, you know, damage someone's reputation."

Computer science programs are required to make sure students have an understanding of ethical issues related to computing in order to be accredited by ABET, a global accreditation group for university science and engineering programs. Some computer science departments have folded the topic into a broader class, and others have stand-alone courses. But until recently, ethics did not seem relevant to many students.

"Compared to transportation or doctors, your daily interaction with physical harm or death or pain is a lot less if you are writing software for apps," said Joi Ito, director of the MIT Media Lab.

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