I listened to, “What Happens to Privacy in the Age of AI?” on the Wall Street Journal’s podcast, The Journal.

This podcast featured Meredith Whitaker, the president of the nonprofit encrypted messaging app Signal. Meredith Whitaker, has for a long time been an advocate of data privacy. Her experience includes working at Google for over 13 years and she currently works as a co-founder of a research center called AI Now Institute. She interviewed with Sam Schechner of the Wall Street Journal during a live event at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In 2014, she debuted Signal, a messaging app that provides end-to-end encryption. She says that Signal goes out of its way to collect no data from its users. This type of messaging is different in that large tech companies can gather data from its users and figure out: Who you’re talking to, who your friends are, where you’re located, and more. Whitaker explains that large technology platforms rely heavily on surveillance and make money by showing targeted ads that are based on user data they’ve gathered over time. The goal of the app Signal is to return the idea of private conversation that has existed for hundreds of thousands of years back to the modern “digital sphere.”

Whitaker goes on to explain the rapidly developing world of AI and how it’s suddenly become a mainstream term in just the past two years. It’s being touted as the big “new thing” and even equivalates it’s importance to that of the printing press or the wheel. She warns the audience that tech giants can use AI to gather intelligence and that this intelligence is only privy to a select few hands, so to say. She warns that as the bigger AI gets, the tech giants that are owners of this information, can become even more powerful. She remarks, “What’s wrong with, you know, several large companies controlling this type of power?” With this information, companies can make decisions and predictions that will shape, inform, and optimize our lives.

This podcast was eye opening to me especially when Whitaker says, “It will be important to realize who will get to decide how AI is used and for whom, and what sort of incentives are driving (this technology).” It’s scary how much power is in the hands of so few with this implementation of AI and how it has rapidly become a part of our life. Cameras can monitor what we do, and intelligence is collected through our conversations, messages, emails, and internet searches. It appears that tech companies are benefitting significantly from the data from its users and it’s becoming more prevalent every day. It’s inevitable that this is going to keep continuing and there doesn’t seem to be an end in sight.

At the end of the interview, Meredith Whitaker, took a question from Sir Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web. He pointed out the bright sides of technology and discussed how users have the option to choose apps that meet their need. Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI (parent company of Chat GPT) states in his Interview with Time Magazine for CEO of the year, that AI is basically a machine as smart or smarter than a human and has the potential to “benefit humanity.” Altman states that AI can “turbocharge the global economy, expand the frontiers of scientific knowledge and dramatically improve the standards of living for billions of people.”

I think that one thing that can be done is to be more cognizant of how we use social media and search engines. This includes being more critical of the applications we choose, continuing to select the option that apps not track our information, and realize that this type of intelligence is in the hands of just a select few important people. It’s shocking to think of how powerful these tech giants can become by owning this information.

Sam Schechner (Host). Wall Street Journal. (2023, January 28). What Happens to Privacy in the Age of AI (No. 42) [Audio podcast episode]. The Journal. https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal

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