My User’s Keeper: the Role of Ethics in Human Computer Interaction

Love, home automation, transportation – no matter the need, in today’s age it seems there truly is an app for that. Yet as tech companies come up with ingenious and lucrative ways to meet even the most complex of human needs, the question arises: what responsibility do developers have to address and guard against any dangers their creations may present?

Tinder, one of the most popular dating apps on the market (and possibly the most notorious) raised concerns not only surrounding the psychological impact of gamifying dating, but also risks to privacy and public health. Domestic abuse cases involving smart home technologies have left advocates and law enforcement officials at a loss, as the technology itself is so new that it is a struggle just to find the language to describe its abuse, let alone train individuals in fighting it. As of May 2018, over 100 Uber drivers were accused of sexual assault in the last four years, despite Uber’s claims of thorough background checks.

While some of these risks may seem common sense to many (i.e. malicious users on dating apps), others came as a surprise, even to the teams that developed them (i.e. abusers exploiting home automation). In the first case, is it the company’s responsibility to combat such seemingly obvious risks, or should that responsibility lie with the user? In the latter case, do companies have a moral obligation to anticipate adversarial use of their software? If software companies should in fact be their users’ keepers, how can they do so?

In my presentation I aim to examine these aforementioned three points: the dangers associated with commonplace software applications, the ethical quandary this poses to the companies who publish them, and ways to address such issues.