

ARTICLE

Why we need a solid foundation for navigating the ethics of big tech

BY JASON THACKER

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There isn't much that Americans seem to agree on these days. Even as COVID-19 brought some national unity, we are beginning to see the fraying of American society once again. Political, social, economic, and religious issues have sorted us into tribes and tribes of tribes. It is difficult to keep up to date on the number of differing viewpoints and interest groups. But there is one concern that seems to bring the fraying parties and purported enemies together: the power and influence of technology on our lives.

Last fall, Pew Research Center released a report (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/29/americans-have-become-much-less-positive-about-tech-companies-impact-on-the-u-s/>) that for the first time in their research, Americans now have less faith in technology companies than in churches. This is striking based on the secularization of society and many popular claims that religion only divides us. This study proves what most of us already know—technology is ubiquitous in our society. The power that these tools have over our lives is beginning to be revealed.

Consider that both President Trump and Speaker Pelosi both agreed (<https://apnews.com/77089929bc3d3c8279562f5714e0dc18>) that the dangers of letting Huawei, a Chinese technology firm, build critical 5G infrastructure were just too great, given the power and influence of the Chinese government over Huawei. Leaders in both parties are sounding the alarm of the undue influence that China wields over companies like Huawei. While differing opinions on policy prescriptions for addressing technological and privacy issues still exist, the role that technology wields in our lives is the common factor in this rare bipartisan concern.

A solid foundation

People from across the political spectrum are rightfully concerned about how these tools are being used but lack a common ethical framework to engage these weighty, and often thorny, issues with wisdom.

As we debate the merits and pitfalls of emerging technologies, we need a solid foundation on which to build our ethical decisions so that we are not blown about by the winds of an ever-changing public opinion or political class. We

live in a pluralistic society with people from various backgrounds and faiths, but the Christian moral tradition provides us with a common understanding of how every human being has value and worth regardless of how society views them. Every human being is created in God's image and thus deserves our attention and care.

Whether it's the effects of automation on our jobs, privacy concerns over government surveillance, or the use of artificial intelligence in warfare, these technologies are raising tough ethical challenges that we must be prepared to engage. Christians are called to step in and fight for the dignity of every human being, regardless of social or economic status.

  (<http://twitter.com/home/?status=twitterfy> via @erlc)

This dignity isn't based on what we contribute to society, by some ambiguous idea of fairness, or even by notions of personal autonomy often grounded in constitutional law. While these ideas may sound good on the surface or provide a common language with which to engage these issues, they are often unstable definitions; they lack a transcendent foundation on which to build our ethical guidelines for technologies. But the Christian understanding of human dignity is based in the reality of a creator God who made us and directs our daily lives.

From the baby in the womb to the woman laying on her deathbed, the Christian understanding of dignity extends to all people, even our "enemies." This principle of human dignity applies in every area of our society, but it can be incredibly beneficial in the debates over the ethical uses of technology, because it helps us to see that real people are being affected by our policies and social decisions. Real lives are on the line. Whether it's the effects of automation on

our jobs, privacy concerns over government surveillance, or the use of artificial intelligence in warfare, these technologies are raising tough ethical challenges that we must be prepared to engage. Christians are called to step in and fight for the dignity of every human being, regardless of social or economic status.

When we debate the merits and pitfalls of technology such as facial recognition surveillance in policing or the effects of tracking on public health and privacy, we must keep in mind that there are always good and bad uses of these powerful technologies. Police might be able to solve cold cases with a few clicks on a smartphone, as in the case of Clearview AI

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/20/reader-center/insider-clearview-ai.html>) and their incredibly controversial use of scraping all publicly available photos on Google, Facebook, and Venmo to build their facial recognition system. But on the other hand, privacy advocates have long feared that this is the same technology we see being used in China as thousands of Uyghur Muslims (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/april-web-only/artificial-intelligence-facial-recognition-muslims-china.html>) are being profiled and detained based solely on the fact that they do not swear ultimate loyalty to Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Communist state.

Many U.S. municipalities

(<https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2020/02/portland-considering-strictest-ban-on-facial-recognition-technology-in-the-us.html>), such as Oakland and San Francisco, have passed outright bans on facial recognition technology, with more on the horizon. These bans are being passed because people are

rightfully concerned about how these tools can be abused to profile people of color or how our anonymity and privacy will be ultimately erased if deployed in mass, just as the famed 1984 novel by George Orwell predicted.

As the ethical issues with big tech continue to expand, our society must recognize the value, dignity, and worth of every human being as made by God and in his likeness. Nothing we create with our hands is more valuable than our neighbor. Jesus Christ reminds us of this in the Gospel of Matthew when he sums up the entirety of the law in the greatest commandments. Christ proclaims that we are to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. That love for our neighbors is based on the fact that they too are made by God and in his image. This understanding of human dignity can extend past our partisan divides and speak to the heart of the issues surrounding how we navigate technology's growing influence on our lives.



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Jason Thacker serves as chair of research in technology ethics and creative director at ERLC. In his role as creative director, he oversees the communications team, including all creative design projects. His new book, *The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity*, releases March 2020 with Zondervan. He is a ... [Read More \(https://erlc.com/multi_author/jason-thacker/\)](https://erlc.com/multi_author/jason-thacker/)

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