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Tomorrow's business leaders need high ethical standards

By Patrick Lecomte

IN MANY cities around the world, there are ongoing experiments for self-driving cars, also known as autonomous vehicles (AV). However, the use of such vehicles, which are described as more efficient than manual cars, comes with an array of moral issues which might stall the emergence of a successful industry. The challenges pertaining to the use of information-based smart technologies such as big data analytics are well known. When it comes to self-driving cars, the conundrum is even more excruciating. It is a matter of life and death literally.

Indeed, imagine you are in your AV and suddenly while you are exiting a bridge, a group of pedestrians rush on the road (for example, children running after a ball). The driverless vehicle has not enough space to carefully slow down and stop. The only options are either to crash the vehicle onto the bridge's side railings, with the risk of falling over and killing the AV's occupants, or to drive over the pedestrians and killing some of them.

What should the AV do? These types of ethical questions are those facing AV manufacturers. To address such dilemmas, researchers at the Toulouse School of Economics in France have conducted experiments to gauge public opinion and come up with an acceptable answer.

Research shows that there is no right or wrong answer – what is acceptable at the aggregate level (ie reducing the death toll) is often not agreeable to individuals.

Overwhelmingly, individuals do not agree to sacrifice themselves to save other lives. They'd rather not ride AVs at all. Therefore, what role should AV manufacturers play in shaping the consensus? Should exogenous factors such as the occupants' ages relative to pedestrians' impact how the AV reacts (for example, saving younger lives)?

At the time when Volkswagen, one of the most trusted car manufacturers globally, has been caught red handed for cheating on such an important societal issue as the environment, will the public ever trust AV manufacturers to embed universally agreed algorithmic ethics in their vehicles, irrespective of occupants' status or wealth?

In essence, these questions are not new. In 1532, French writer Francois Rabelais famously explained that "science without conscience is but the ruin of the soul". European Renaissance thinkers such as Leonardo marvelled at the possibilities of science and technology while putting human beings at the centre of it all.

This is the paradox of smart technologies: They will only deliver their promises if they are supported by strong ethical standards which indeed take us back to the quintessential values of humanist philosophy.

Companies involved in the new promising sectors of smart technologies (for instance, smart cities, driverless cars) should take notice. A new legal environment should possibly accompany the rapidly changing ethical landscape so that no executives nor entrepreneurs be ever tempted to trade morals for dollars at the expense of human lives.

21st century business opportunities will redefine what it means to create value in a human society for human customers. Trust – and the ability to build and maintain it in the long term – will be the most valuable asset for any company, any industry, and any country for that matter. As technologies open up ever more possibilities that question our ethical choices as a society, whom we are willing to trust will define how we consume. Tomorrow's business leaders will face increasingly complex moral responsibilities. To succeed, they will have to answer to consumers' renewed call for ethics, way beyond the bottom line and the current corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework.

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