

We the People: Human Purpose in a Digital Age

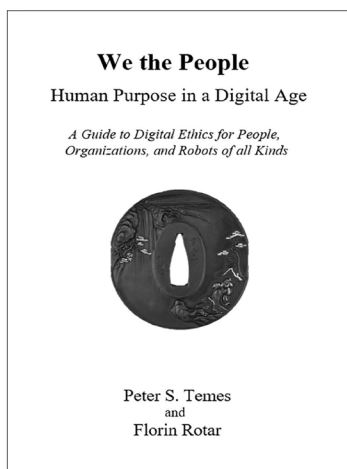
A Guide to Digital Ethics for People,
Organizations, and Robots of all Kinds



About the authors

Peter Temes is the author of “The Just War” (“A great civic service,” according to *The San Francisco Chronicle*) and “Against School Reform” (“Inspiring and beautifully written,” noted *The Baltimore Sun*). He is president of the Institute for Innovation in Large Organizations (ILO).

Florin Rotar is a senior executive leader at Avanade, the leading provider of innovative digital and cloud services, business solutions and design-led experiences on the Microsoft ecosystem.



In April of 2018, leaders from a dozen large players in the digital economy, four universities, one Indian Tribal Nation, the U.S. government and several large not-for-profit organizations gathered to craft a digital ethics “Declaration of Independence and Constitution.” The participants in this “digital ethics summit” were technology executives, professors, HR leaders, graduate students, diplomats, writers and consultants.

Among those participants were Peter Temes, president of the Institute for Innovation in Large Organizations (ILO), and Florin Rotar, a senior executive leader at Avanade. In their new book, titled “We the People,” Temes and Rotar set forth the framework of ideas behind this groundbreaking effort and share the working drafts of the key documents that came out of the summit. They take on what will become the most pressing issue of our age: how to keep digital systems from running away with our civilization.

The importance of a civilization-wide conversation on digital ethics

Computers and the automated systems they run help us live longer, healthier lives, communicate instantly across the world and live better by almost any material measure. Digital systems are faster, smarter and more capable than ever. The rising ability of these systems to learn from large amounts of information means they’re getting more powerful at a faster pace. As these systems make more decisions on behalf of more people, they confront ethical choices that we need to tell them about in advance so they do what we want them to do.

Humans make most ethical decisions quickly based on gut feelings that reflect values we often don’t even know we have. Yet now we must know, so we can tell digital systems how to make these tough choices. We need to talk about ethics, across our civilization, right now, to make sure that we “code in” what we really believe about these tough choices.

“This book couldn’t be more timely and relevant. In the age of ‘big data’ where so much is measurable, Peter and Florin provide an essential framework.”

– Steven Miller, Chief Financial Officer, Warby Parker

From instance-based ethics to principle-based ethics

To do this coding-in, we need to keep in mind that digital systems are built on a “stack,” layers of technology going from the more general to the more specific. We must make sure that the first layer in every technology stack is an ethics layer. Thinking and talking about ethics must become part of the software engineer’s, data scientist’s and system architect’s toolkit.

Key to this is making the critical shift from instance-based ethics to principle-based or rule-based ethics. This means that we can’t rely on the famous “I know it when I see it” standard put forth by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart as he tried to define pornography. Instead, we need to put our most important values into clearly worded definitions, so our digital systems can do what we want them to do, and not what we don’t, even in circumstances we can’t anticipate.

With a principle-based approach we can move toward algorithms that can be trained to apply these principles. Humans would still do the values-laden thinking work, but systems would apply those principles at scale. This book exists in part to remind readers of our high duty to be sure that we write our software so that algorithms are always governed by human purpose and human values.

“‘We the People’ sets the stage for a new digital constitution. This book will both scare you and give you hope for the future.”

– Luke Mansfield, Chief Strategy Officer, Harley-Davidson

Talking about ideas, ideals and values – and tools to help

The first part of “We the People” focuses on why the conversation about ethics is so vital. The importance of this work should become clear and the reader should feel that it’s time to do something about digital ethics. That will involve hard work and talking about ideas, ideals and values.

The second part of the book offers tools to help start and spread that conversation in practical, useful ways. Three documents are presented that were originally drafted in early versions during the digital ethics summit.

The first of these documents, a statement of aspirations, outlines fundamental ideas that form the most basic layer of ethical belief. It is not a set of rules or expectations, but a statement of human purpose and appreciation for human life and community. It talks about why we develop technologies, how these technologies reflect generations of human endeavor and value creation, and, at the most general level, how the gains from technologies should enrich shared human experience.

The second document, a statement of duties, expresses what different parties in the digital ethics ecosystem ought to recognize as important obligations based on their roles as individual creators, companies, governments and consumers.

The third document is a guide for designers and builders of digital systems as they navigate practical trade-offs in the course of their work. The guidance is presented in the form of positive biases, including:

- A bias toward building and honoring trust with users and data sources.
- A bias toward informed, transparent and consensual use of data over hidden use of data.
- A bias toward minimizing harm over maximizing effectiveness and efficiency.

These documents are designed to prompt discussion and guide action. Who should discuss these documents, help them evolve, embrace and endorse them? Everyone. Every company, every creator, every user, every person touched by digital systems.

Expanding the conversation

"We the People" provides food for thought – and action – to expand the conversation on digital ethics. Topics covered include:

- The future of work – and the question of whether people will become obsolete
- Getting privacy right
- Avoiding the pitfalls of algorithmic cruelty and biases
- Who owns what in a digital age?
- The digital revolution and the American civil rights movement

Keeping our hands on the controls

As we reflect on what we believe and why, and as we wire these beliefs into our machines and devices, we make the world better when we ensure the freedom of the individual to life, liberty, health and property. Our machines and systems help us do this so long as we, the people who make and run these systems, keep our minds on the virtues that drive our sense of the good and decent life, and our hands on the controls.

Would you like to become part of the digital ethics conversation? We invite you to buy a copy of "[We the People](#)" to learn more about human purpose in the digital age.

About Avanade

Avanade is the leading provider of innovative digital and cloud services, business solutions and design-led experiences on the Microsoft ecosystem. Our professionals bring bold, fresh thinking combined with technology, business and industry expertise to help make a human impact on our clients, their customers and their employees. We are the power behind the Accenture Microsoft Business Group, helping companies to engage customers, empower employees, optimize operations and transform products, leveraging the Microsoft platform. Avanade has 36,000 professionals in 24 countries, bringing clients our best thinking through a collaborative culture that honors diversity and reflects the communities in which we operate. Majority owned by Accenture, Avanade was founded in 2000 by Accenture LLP and Microsoft Corporation. Learn more at www.avanade.com.

About ILO

The Institute for Innovation in Large Organizations (ILO) is a membership organization for large companies, government agencies, and not-for-profits, bringing together senior executives leading innovation for knowledge sharing and community building.