

# AI and You

Transcript

Guests: Hannah Grubbs and Shea Sullivan of the Institute for Digital Humanity

Episode 93

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Hello, and welcome to episode 93! Today my guests are Hannah Grubbs and Shea Sullivan from the Institute for Digital Humanity in Minnesota. It is a “bi-partisan, cross-cultural, digital ethics think tank advocating for civil rights issues connected to advances in technology.” Now there are a lot of organizations with titles and descriptions like that out there, but what caught my attention about this one is that it is entirely *student-run*, by students of North Central University in Minneapolis. Their [web site](#) has got the sort of jolly, chatty, colorful vibe you’d expect from students, and yet here they are at ground zero of one of the most volatile areas in today’s society. Listen to parts of their mission statement:

New technology always brings change. In many ways, 20 years after the digital revolution, we’re more connected than ever before. But is this a genuine connection? And -- as a society -- what has it cost us? How many personal liberties and privacy values are we willing to sacrifice under the guise of security? How many human professionals – doctors, lawyers, public servants, psychologists, and teachers – will we allow to be replaced by biased and inaccurate algorithms? How much online hate speech – and digital infringement on our free speech -- will we allow to contaminate and stifle our democracy? How divided and manipulated will we allow ourselves to become – by social media's filter bubbles – before we put our feet down and collectively say “enough is enough”?

I’ve read a lot of corporate mission statements and in nearly all cases the most complimentary thing I can say about them is that thankfully I no longer remember them, although I know I regret wasting the time to read them. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about. Not so with this. To the extent that any words on a page can encapsulate and convey a living purpose, this does so. They’re not sitting around griping; they’re taking substantive action in alignment with that mission statement. They’ve created curricula for educational institutions to teach digital ethics; they’ve created programs addressing issues like privacy and disinformation; they’ve partnered with Indiana University, and also with the Netflix team that produced the documentary *Coded Bias*, which you may know as the film about Joy Buolamwini’s experience uncovering racial bias in algorithms to develop a program around it that aired on Nebraska’s PBS. And they did all this without any trace of the sort of grandstanding, hand-wringing, or sluggish bureaucracy that’s all too common. I find that authenticity inspiring, and so I’m happy to bring you their story. Hannah is a second-year journalism major and Shea, who is their Associate Director, is in her final year of interdisciplinary studies. I’ll let them tell you more about themselves as we get into the interview.

**Peter:** Shea Sullivan, Hannah Grubbs, welcome to AI and you.

Thanks for having us.

Yeah, thanks for having us.

**Peter:** Alright, so, I really want to explore this institute as a student-run think tank. I want to find out how that started because the origin story seems like there could be something interesting in there. Tell me how this came about.

**Shea:** So the Institute for Digital Humanity started back in 2019 when Professor McKain came into one of his classrooms and told us that robots were taking over the world and asked us what we wanted to do about it. That seems like a silly fun way to start something like this, but ultimately what he was doing was asking us how we wanted to make a change in the technology that's affecting our lives because it was something that was starting to take hold and I mean the internet has been around for quite a while now and has started to impact different things around our world and the way that we communicate with one another and so we decided to take this opportunity to make good of it, rather than just sit by and let the robots take over.

**Peter:** Hannah, what did that mean to you when you found out about this, what was driving you, provoking you to get on board?

**Hannah:** Well, originally, if I'm being honest, it was just because I was part of the class and at the time I was a little freshman and I was like what, what's going on and just kind of doing my work and the more that I got involved, the more that I realized this is an actual problem that's going to affect me for the rest of my life, it's gonna affect my parents and then also my future kids future generations to come. So I wanted to help in any way that I could.

**Peter:** Now, what did that problem look like that? That's a big amorphous thing. But to you, what did it mean? Did it conjure up any scenes?

**Hannah:** That's a good question. I the problem I guess you already alluded to that is a lot. It's much bigger than just one thing. There's a lot of different things that go into it. I think maybe for me the biggest thing that I think about is privacy and how that affects, especially because we're on technology all the time, like our data being stolen, like I wish that I could just be in my room, do my own thing but that's not the case anymore. Someone's always watching, someone's always taking my data. So that's the biggest thing that I think of and also just like living in downtown Minneapolis now, my eyes were opened to a lot of things that shouldn't be going on like racist algorithms that are going on and then predictive policing like that's not something I want to be a part of.

**Peter:** Shea, what did robots taking over the world mean to you, did it give you a visual, How did it grab you?

**Shea:** I mean for me I think about like Hannah said, living in Minneapolis, , and how these algorithms are affecting our daily lives. So it's things like, your Netflix or your Spotify and these things may seem harmless when you're getting songs that you might like, or TV shows that you might like or things like that. But what happens when those same algorithms that are making those decisions are also making decisions about whether or not people get jobs or housing or things like that. So, in a place like Minneapolis where we have such a wide diversity of people

who are in our area and who are literally right next door to us, it is very fascinating to me how algorithms are taking advantage of certain people. And so I was always worried about how my neighbor was being affected by this algorithm that may be privileged for me and I may be benefiting from it, but at the same point, my neighbor is being harmed by this and is being denied housing, or a job or whatever. And that's their livelihood.

**Peter:** You both mentioned Minneapolis here as being a factor. Was the George Floyd death, the murder, was that something that galvanized any of your thinking or motivation in this respect. Did it focus attention on Minneapolis as a place where what you're addressing needed particular attention?

**Shea:** So North Central, our school that we both go to, was the host of the George Floyd memorial. And so we saw firsthand what the effects of that was on the family and things like that. And we are quite literally a couple blocks over from Cup Foods and where that entire incident happened. So for us this is right in our backyards and this was the breeding ground for a lot of these topics that we're now discussing and tackling. And so the Institute for Digital Humanity has tried to help some of those communities that were affected by this by helping speak up for them and helping also make those changes on the technological side of things. rather than the things that we're always seeing in the news, because although those things that we're seeing in the news are important, there are a lot of other factors that go into that that go unnoticed.

**Peter:** So Hannah, as you've been working here, what has surprised you or what have you learned as a result of the time you've spent with the institute in how you're thinking has developed and refined about the problem?

**Hannah:** I think one of the biggest things that surprised me is the concept of filter bubbles and how real that they are. Just to go off the example of George Floyd, I went back home for the summer, which is Ohio, and my parents have this totally different view than what I know to be true actually going on here because I was here, well at least for the after effects of it. But it's just crazy how much filter bubbles can skew our thinking and make us think that we *think* the right thing and that is true and that our opinions are true. But actually, that's not right. And another thing that has changed my perspective is just the idea of context and like rhetorical theory, we've seen a lot of cancel culture and deplatforming people. But now we're trying to think of, look at it like should they be deplatformed or canceled. And how does like context fit into all of that? We talk about like digital forgiveness. Like the robots, they don't have that because they're just looking at someone as a number on a screen. But we want to bring back the humanity to that. And that's part of our Christian aspect, going to a Christian school. We want to bring back the humanity and bring back the forgiveness and second chances that humans should all deserve.

**Peter:** And so Shea here at the beginning of this professor dumps this thing on your lap of robots taking over the world and then I don't know walks off, and you create this. So what has arc been like for you, because at the beginning this is, it has got to be this this huge, it's like the six blind men and the elephant, right? You're just introduced to a part of the elephant, you

don't know it's a tail or tusk and now you've had more time to know that, what are you focusing on, what's your primary mission?

**Shea:** Well ultimately that's a multifaceted question, there's not just one initiative that the IDH is specifically focusing on. I think when I think back to that when I first heard that, I was like what robots? Oh my gosh, I'm thinking like these big metal clunky things walking down the street, and oh my gosh there's going to be a robot army and all this stuff, but then when we started to dive into how just how this technology is impacting us, ultimately what this is about, like Hannah was talking about the narrative behind it and the different theories, this is ultimately just about communication between human beings and how we communicate with one another. So we're no longer looking at written works that are pen and paper and things like that, we're looking at technology that you can communicate in a multitude of different ways, you can hear my voice. I mean I'm communicating with you and you're not even in the same room as me, you're not having to wait for me to send you a letter or anything like that. And so ultimately what it boils down to is being able to have cross cultural conversations with one another. And putting students and people all across the world into rooms where they're able to have conversations about all these different topics because it doesn't necessarily boil down to one topic is better than the other or more important or anything like that. They're all important. It's more about being able to have those conversations with one another where I'm not worried about calling you a name or saying that you fall on one side of the aisle or another. It's more about saying, "hey, this is affecting our friend, our neighbor, this person that I know, and this is how it's affecting them and how can we work together to find a common solution?" So it's really more about how can we bring people together?

**Peter:** And that comes out loud and clear, right? And the mission statement and the description of the institute where you say "bipartisan cross cultural digital ethics think tank, advocating for civil rights issues connected to advances in technology." And you mentioned students. So is the primary target of your activities, students? Is that where you're trying to turn the knob?

**Shea:** I don't know that students are necessarily our primary target audience or anything like that. I think it's interesting that if you sit in our meetings or classes or anything that we do with the Institute for Digital Humanity. Our biggest thing is always, how can we explain technology to my 90-year-old grandma on Facebook? It's something as simple as trying to get people of all ages, all races, all different walks of life, trying to communicate. So, students and educators and things like that are the bulk of our staff and the people that we work with, but that's mainly because we think that education is the answer to this. We think that being able to have these conversations and educate one another, because we are living in a world where there's so much right at our fingertips. I can hop on Google and I can look up anything about any topic and find out all of the information about that topic. And I can virtually become an expert in frogs or cameras or trees overnight. And so, the fact that we have all this information right at our disposal just means that this is a more important time than ever to be having that information and be educating one another.

**Peter:** I like that you brought that up, that example, because those of us who were around before Google and remember a time when you couldn't get any piece of human knowledge instantly for free, tend to think that people like yourselves who have grown up in an era where that's all you've known, have would have difficulty appreciating the magnitude of that advance. And yet what's actually striking, though, is how little difference it seems to have made to the quality of our lives, despite the fact that we can now know essentially everything instantly. You talked about education there and I noticed that you've got a curriculum, *Coded Bias* based on the movie. Can you talk more about what that is and how it came to be?

**Shea:** So we started working with Netflix's Coded Bias team on developing a curriculum. Talking about digital ethics and explaining these algorithms and things like that to different students across America. And so, we actually had developed a curriculum for the ADL a couple of years ago that was a 10 day curriculum. And we did a national pilot with that where we put it in high schools and things like that. And so, curriculum is just one of the many ways that we educate people but we've actually developed a couple of different curriculums. So *Coded Bias* specifically talks about facial recognition. And so this past year when we worked with the Safety Not Surveillance coalition to help get the facial recognition ban passed in Minneapolis we started to partner with Coded Bias on how we could better explain that and educate these younger generations on exactly what is facial recognition and things like that.

**Peter:** I see. Okay so Hannah, maybe you could field this one: being students at a university, you've got to get degrees, you've got to learn things and a lot of institutes I feel and places studying this are just doing exactly that and only that, studying. And you are oriented around action, it looks like you have specific goals for making a difference. How in the discussions in the working of the institute, does that play out when you're trying to work with all the different people there and drive towards a goal and to decide upon a goal and then implement it when this is so big, I mean here you are at ground zero of one of the hottest, most wide-reaching phenomena of our times and you've chosen to put yourself there. What's that like when you're down in the trenches doing that work, what sort of conversations and cooperation or otherwise do you observe?

**Hannah:** I mean it seems like a big problem and it's a little bit overwhelming but we have a lot of partnerships that are helping us along the way, but we have this thing called the Living Textbook papers which is just a combination of everything that we've ever talked about from podcasts assignments that's all somewhere together, I'm not sure where it is, but it's all together and we can access it easily, we just build off of it constantly and we always use the same kind of curriculum, same terms so that it's very easy for people to get on boarded. Yeah and then partnerships with the ADL, with Indiana University, with the ACLU, we have a lot of different things that we all work together to get accomplished.

**Peter:** What kind of tools do you consider to be at your disposal here? People often think about student activists as working along a spectrum that goes from activism, to protests, to civil disobedience, and that's just part of the stereotype. Where do you decide to inhabit that spectrum?

**Hannah:** I mean I would say I don't know how I would use the terms exactly, but I mean nothing crazy, nothing illegal of course. But I mean we're advocating for digital ethics. We're also like in legislation but in the legal way we're talking to representatives, we're getting meetings with them, we're helping pass legislation on like Shea said the ban of the facial recognition. So stuff like that. I don't know Shea if you want to add anything.

**Shea:** I think it's interesting that you said that a lot of times students can be roped down that stereotype. A lot of times I think activism looks different than people think it does. People think that activism means that I'm going out picketing and protesting and standing out in front of businesses and things like that. And a lot of times activism doesn't look like that. Activism looks like me being able to have a conversation with my peers and say, what do you think about this topic? Dr. McKain provided a very welcoming atmosphere in his classrooms where he basically told us that there's nothing you can't say in this classroom, and if you ever get yourself in a jam where you put your foot in your mouth or anything like that, I will help you get out of it. And so he helped facilitate these conversations and led with a Socratic style where we were able to have conversations about difficult things like George Floyd or like the January 6th insurrection or anything where we were able to just have open conversations among students who fell on extreme opposite sides of that spectrum. And yet we were able to look each other in the face and say, "You're a human being and I'm a human being and therefore I value what you think and I want to hear your opinion, and you want to hear mine." And so just being able to facilitate that open environment where you can have conversations and then say, okay, so now we've had this conversation, what do you think the best solution is and then go out and do that. And it looks like helping write legislation, like writing research papers that future students like Hannah mentioned, we have the Living Textbook project and that's basically this ongoing website where we continue to upload our research and then continue to find new research and that helps as we lead curriculum across the nation. It helps us to continue each of those curriculum's feedback into the living textbook project. So not only are we getting ideas and information from the students within our classrooms at North Central, but we're also getting ideas and information from students at Creighton University, or Indiana University, or students who are joining us from Texas or Arizona or North Carolina or all across the nation. And they're able to still impact this research and say, "Well, this is what I'm hearing within my filter bubble." So it's a lot of just that cross cultural interaction that we're able to have where we're able to keep feeding into each other.

**Peter:** And I'm struck by the care that you put into the cooperation and the communication with each other because there's a lot of narrative visible from the outside, where I am, of academia today in in the west and particularly the US being characterized by—how to put it—minefields around what you can say and what you can express and certain conversations being off limits or too volatile to express. Now you said the opposite of that. And I wonder whether the fact that you're able to have these inclusive conversations with people on different sides of such ah fiery issues as January 6th and just about anything that's in the headlines today is a model for how we might be able to come together through those things. Is that a theme that you develop? Is that something you take out into the world with your curricula?

**Hannah:** We had a community education event I think in the fall was called Plugged In. But we just talk and we invite people to share their opinions and we're honest with them about what we think and we encourage them to be honest as well and I was just in a in a class with Dr. McKain today, we're talking about the Dean Scream from forever ago in the presidential campaign, but he's always encouraging us to be honest because he wants to know what we think and the only way that you're gonna get to the heart of these issues is if we're honest with each other and we get to our hearts and what we think about things, so it's a very beneficial tool that we use all the time.

**Peter:** Well, I like that; I've had a lot of people on the show and they're not as passionate as you are, they're not always as transparent and authentic about it as you were; that was a vulnerable sort of statement and it's a very useful one. Also the Howard Dean Scream, I have not thought about that in a long time.

That's the end of the first part of the interview. I'll give you some time to absorb that before we finish it next week.

In today's news ripped from the headlines about AI, and this one's actually from last May, more than half of Europeans want to replace their lawmakers with AI. A study conducted by researchers at IE University – that stands for *Instituto de Empresa* but they like to go by just IE, at their Center for the Governance of Change, published in their Tech Insights report, surveyed nearly 3,000 people from 11 countries to ask how they would feel if some of the national parliamentarians in their country were swapped with AIs, and 51% of the Europeans liked the idea. Outside Europe, it was popular in China and unpopular in the US. This news perhaps carries more undertones as a result of the interview we've just been listening to. The data is broken down along a lot of axes, and you can see that younger people are more willing to make concessions of privacy – again, something we have to balance against what we've been hearing just now. The academic director, Oscar Jonsson, opined that people feel that politics is getting worse, politicians are getting more polarized, and so AI would presumably be more objective. Of course, the headline is that “1 in 2 Europeans want to replace national MPs with robots.” It is an arresting image; you have to wonder what their experience with AI making political decisions is such that they would be that trusting of it; I think it says more about their level of disgust with the human politicians.

Next week I'll conclude the interview with Shea and Hannah when we'll talk about their work with the Safety Not Surveillance coalition and issues like predictive policing, bias and privacy on social media, and you'll get a real good feel for what it's like to be in their shoes doing this kind of work and a lot of the events they're involved with. That's next week on *AI and You*. Until then, remember: no matter how much computers learn how to do, it's how we come together as *humans* that matters.

<http://aiandyou.net>