

# AI and You

Transcript

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

Episode 94

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Hello, and welcome to episode 94! So here we are about to pick up the rest of the interview with Shea Sullivan and Hannah Grubbs, students at North Central University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who helped found the [Institute for Digital Humanity](#), which is a think tank entirely run by students, and boy, do they have a lot on the boil. You know, I've said it before and I'll say it again, students are my favorite audience because they engage with the themes and issues of AI so readily, and they bring a tidal wave of energy to the party. A lot of audiences I speak to find themselves paralyzed at some point, and I have to work through that, but not students, they don't waste time hand-wringing or hesitating, they just get stuck right in.

And you're about to learn some more of that in this conclusion of the interview when you hear the things they've been up to. We talked last time about how they started the IDH because of a remark made by a professor, the sort of human-facing issues of technology that they address, and how they do that, like with a partnership with Netflix to construct a learning module around the documentary *Coded Bias*, and some of the principles they follow. It's quite informative as a blueprint for doing something like this yourself, if you're a student somewhere with some spare time, or maybe you want to partner with the IDH yourself. They've got so much going on, like partnerships with the Anti-Defamation League, Indiana University, and the ACLU, I hardly know where to start. I really like what they're doing as a model for how youth can get involved in these issues. And if you're at a school that could use an energizing talk about AI that could spark some interest in this direction, do please let me know, because I like doing that more than anything else.

So we're going to get back into the interview and Hannah and Shea will tell you about the living textbook project, the Safety Not Surveillance coalition, and how they've engaged with many of these issues at a grassroots level. Here we go.

**Peter:** You mentioned legislation. Can you talk about what you've been involved with and what differences you've made and what that experience has been like?

**Shea:** So we last year we helped the Safety Not Surveillance coalition which is something that I believe started between the ACLU of Minnesota and Stanford University and a couple other local organizations within the twin cities that we're concerned about privacy and surveillance issues. And we worked with them to help pass the facial recognition ban in the city of Minneapolis last year. and then we've also written a number of different white papers on predictive policing, facial recognition, data privacy and student data privacy and things like that. There's been a number of different opportunities that we've had. We're also still working with the Safety Not Surveillance coalition. They have some different legislative agendas within the state of Minnesota and then like the city of St. Paul and things like that and trying to get that facial recognition ban passed across the board. But there's also opportunities we work with law

professors like I said at Indiana University and Creighton University and Stout and a couple of others. And so we're always working with their law schools to help provide. What is that legal avenue that we can take? What is that next step? Because a big part of the problem that we're seeing right now with legislation is that technology moved way faster than any sort of legislation can be passed. So a lot of the issue issues right now is that we're encountering problems and encountering things that there's no laws written about. And so when there's no laws written about these things, we're not able to say, well, this is where the precedence lies, this is how this situation should be handled. So companies like Google and Facebook and things like that are basically allowed to make their own rules, and so because we're not able to pass this legislation fast enough, it's up to us as the students and as that next generation to say, what kind of future do we want to have? What do we want this to look like for ourselves? For our kids, for our family members? And so it's things like that where we are just trying to get ahead of the game and we're trying to move faster than the technology.

**Peter:** There are so many dimensions to this. I am reminded of a comparison with Disneyland—bear with me—in that they had to build all kinds of things, which no one had built before. And so no building codes existed. So they as a big company ended up stretching the boundaries of this. If they had to stick within the codes of the city of Anaheim, there'd be no Matterhorn, no Toontown, no Pirates of the Caribbean because those things just weren't on the books. And as a result--and I'm generalizing and oversimplifying a bit here--but they ended up shaping some of those building codes so that that could get done. And so I want to look at the role of technology and see what you have to say about its positive use. Let me see if I can focus this on one thing to begin with and if there's nothing to say about it, we'll move on to something else. But the Minneapolis Police Department has come under a lot of scrutiny for obvious reasons. And if one was looking at them, or indeed any police department, to ascertain whether there was systemic bias, than an objective algorithm might be the thing that people use to find that out. Has that happened? Are you aware of any work or study being done in that respect that applies there or elsewhere, where the technology can actually reveal by us as opposed to just amplifying it?

**Hannah:** Are you asking if the technology can reveal bias in like the police officers or when it's doing its job?

**Peter:** Could infer it; I mean as a sort of oversimplified example, you can look at traffic stops--and I think they did this in Los Angeles--and found that the number of stops of Hispanic people was disproportionate to what was being discovered. So the explanation at that point, the most likely one, was bias. That's just some simple statistics. But you can develop it further. Do you see technology as helping you reveal human bias and similar problems?

**Hannah:** I think it can especially because the technology is made by the humans who had the bias in the first place. So if you're thinking about for example the facial recognition ban that we helped got passed. The reason that we wanted to vanish because it's inherently biased. It doesn't recognize people of color correctly or different genders all the time. But that's the reason we wanted to get banned I mean but that bias obviously came from somewhere. So it's hard to say

that we don't want the technology because it helps in some ways. But also we need to get to the heart of the problem which is who creates the technology in the first place, which is us. So I think technology can be helpful but it also creates more problems if we don't get to the heart of the issue.

**Peter:** Shea, on this topic of inclusiveness: Has your work included working with getting to know and bringing in people who work in the technology who the people who are creating this?

**Shea:** We have been partnering with some local activists and other people from places like IBM and things like that and people that work with different technology companies to kind of see that other side of things too. And a lot of times, those companies are making an effort to try to correct their wrongs or make up for the fact that they're doing these things or they're trying to find people and hire people that can kind of go back and do that work. But again, when the technology has already been created, it's really hard to regulate it because nobody wants to give up that thing that's already helping them. So a lot of times what we're seeing is these technology companies are rather than hiring people to go back through and actually make the algorithms humans again, if you will. Instead, we're seeing companies hiring people to just find the legal loopholes. And so there are a lot of people who have, maybe not necessarily walked away from the technology industry, but they're starting to kind of go the opposite route. We just saw movies like *The Social Dilemma* where a whole bunch of different people from Silicon Valley and the technology industry are coming out now and saying, "look at what these social media companies are doing, look at what this technology is doing to us." And it's interesting to watch how people jump at that and they say, "yeah, the technology is bad. We should get rid of all of it." But then at the same point they turn around and message their friend on Facebook or scroll through Instagram or TikTok or whatever it is. And I mean I myself fall victim to that all the time. But I think it's interesting to see how a lot of these companies are choosing to go the route of covering for themselves rather than actually helping the human beings that they're hurting.

**Peter:** Hannah, how has this work changed your perspective on your use of anything with that level of technology behind it, whether it's social media or anything else interacting with artificial intelligence?

**Hannah:** Whenever I download an app, it always says do you want this to track your location? And now I always say No because I don't want them tracking my location. But it's more than just the kind of being worried about like data and data tracking but also just being conscious of what you're saying on social media because you never know when that can be used against you. But then also being aware of what you see on social media, is that something that's being pushed by an algorithm that has an agenda that you probably don't agree with? But most likely you don't know that it's being pushed by an algorithm. So just not believing everything that I see on social media, but also wanting to get outside of just getting all of my news from social media and looking on different sides of the filter bubble and that means actually talking to people in person. That's a great thing. So yeah, just being more aware of what I'm seeing and what I'm reading that social media that's definitely changed my perspective.

**Peter:** And that's making me think of just how much the environment has changed when I was in school and there was no culture there where what you said would be recorded indelibly and could come back to haunt you at any point in your life and broadcast around the world. And, and we've gone to that, and I'm trying to imagine what it's like now growing up at a time when you can say something in advance of the development of the side of your brain that would say "no, that's not a good idea, let's not do that ", and yet then the entire world finds out about it and now anyone in the future forever who wants to look it up can find it because that's never forgotten now that that just sounds such an inhibition to me. Is that something that that you went through some level of realization or anguish about in in learning to navigate that side of the world, that that essentially your conversations could be public for the entire world and never erased.?

**Hannah:** It's just, it makes me think about, for example, convicted, convicted people. It's they're convicted, they served their time, but that's always on their record, which I don't know if it's right or wrong, but the fact that they probably have changed since being in jail that you don't really get to see that part because you just see the convicted felon and you don't see anything past that. So it's hard to know that everything is always going to be recorded and that everything can always be tracked back to you. So that's something that we're working or trying to figure out how to change that, instead of just automatically canceling someone and just calling it quits.

**Shea:** So yeah, I mean we've looked at, we talk about things like neoliberalism and brand new and how our society has evolved to a point of being so focused on our individual selves and we teach kids now, "just be yourself, everyone will love you if you just are yourself and you just put yourself out there and whatever," and now that has evolved into people my age who are coming into this world and trying to brand themselves and create this persona and things like that. And we talk about how it impacts the way that we interact with one another because now we're so focused on, well, is that part of a person's brand? Are you creating this persona online or is this truly yourself? And so we're looking at different cases, can't remember one of the cases that we talked about was a cyberbullying case in class, and we talked about how the person had basically claimed that it wasn't them, it was just a persona that they were putting online. And so the words that they had put online weren't truthful. It wasn't that they truly wanted to commit this act against another person or do this thing to this other person. They were simply putting on a persona. They were simply saying words and it was just a reference. And so we're looking at things like that, where how are you able to then be truly be yourself if that online version of you is just some fake version.

**Peter:** Is it okay to have more than one yourself? Can someone have a stage presence and a private presence? And what are the boundaries of that? Anything to say about that?

**Hannah:** I think you can, but it makes it hard, especially with all the surveillance and social media that's constantly tracking you. If those ever contradict, then you'll get canceled immediately.

**Peter:** Well perhaps, and I'm thinking maybe just looking at it through a narrow lens, but about actors and they have a stage persona because they're stereotyped as some particular individual and on screen, but that's not who they are in real life and usually we understand that, but that might be too, too much of a, a simplification. Privacy, we're talking about privacy, Let me ask, suppose you had succeeded, suppose you got everything you wanted in privacy and you say, "wow, we're done, let's go find something else to do," what would that world look like?

**Shea:** I think for me that looks like a world where I'm able to interact online without that fear of companies preying on me, whether it be to market me a certain product or show me a tv show or even just find out more information about people like me, people who live in my area, things like that. I think it's just something as simple as being able to go about my daily life without the fear of the repercussions of my online actions, So I think that's interesting, that you talked about the different personas online and things like that, I think we even have some different public figures and things like that that have gone on and done their public acting career, their entertainment career, if you will, but then now it's come time they want to run for public office and so now some of those things that were out there as entertainment and they may have been funny in that moment, they may have had a good laugh, they may have gotten them a lot of publicity now, that's something that they have to worry about affecting their ethos and things like that. and I think it's great that I can go back and look at old videos of Ronald Reagan acting and things like that and laugh and go like, oh, that's such a funny guy compared to the president that he was or whatever. but I think that that's also an important factor: do all of those things impact me for the rest of my life, because I can tell you right now that I've made some decisions as a teenager and as a young adult, now that I'm probably not gonna want following me 20, 30 years down the line when I'm trying to get a job at some company and I'm trying to finally level up my career or whatever that looks like, and now I can't get that because I made a decision now.

**Peter:** We all do, Shea, that's what being a teenager is about. Have to go through the fire to come out the other side. So how would you say that this experience of working in and developing the institute has caused you to grow, where have you expanded who you are?

**Hannah:** I think for me, I grew up in a small town in Ohio, and my worldview was very small, I didn't think past the cows that lived on the other side of the road for me. but being a part of the Institute for Digital humanity has shifted my perspective, given me a lot more awareness to the things that are going on around me, especially when people just go about their daily lives and don't realize that there's robots that are fighting against them, so it's definitely given me a lot of perspective, but I think it's given me a lot of grace and kindness for people that we think deserve to be, the platforms are canceled, but now that I know that there's context behind certain situations that's given me more grace for certain situations that happen in the media.

**Shea:** I think I actually grew up on the opposite side of the filter bubble from Hannah. And so I grew up with two moms in Minneapolis and was pretty well immersed in this, , these diverse communities that we have in Minneapolis from a very young age, both my parents had lived in a whole bunch of different cities from Chicago to New York to New Hampshire and things like that. , and so I grew up with a very, what I felt was well rounded, understanding of the world, but

then I realized very quickly when I went to college that there was this entire other side of the filter bubble that I had no idea existed. And so I remember coming in, and Dr. McKain had said that we could say anything in class and that there was people on both sides of every issue and whatever, and I thought in my head like, Yeah, of course there's people on both sides. But how different can they really be. And I'm sure that there's topics that everybody is able to agree one way on. I'm sure that there's some topics that everybody can think alike on; and very quickly that idea was just kicked right out of my brain because now I was faced with these people that it's not that I didn't think they existed or anything like that. I didn't think that there wasn't Hannah out there in the world. But it just was a different mindset that I was able to experience and these different conversations where I was able to see that Hannah and I are really not that far apart from each other if we simply have a conversation.

**Peter:** So what's on the other side of graduation for you? Are you going to keep going in this, how is it shaping your future?

**Hannah:** I don't know, I might stick around. In one of our classes, we did like a group, right session on just a bunch of different topics. And so since my major is journalism, I enjoyed that a lot and I'm thinking more about like the editing side of the field, but I think my knowledge on these topics from the Institute for Digital Humanity has probably pushed me in that direction. So I might try writing for different companies that advocate for this stuff.

**Peter:** Does the institute allow people to stay in after they've graduated?

**Hannah:** Yeah.

**Peter:** What about you Shea, what do you see on the other side of graduation?

**Shea:** I have always been very focused on people and human beings and advocating for people who may not be able to have their voices heard. So something like technology and digital ethics wasn't something I originally was going to go to school for, it's not something I thought was going to be very interesting and to be honest, I thought it was really nerdy when I first heard about it. but now as I've gone through the last couple of years of working with the IDH we have just covered such a broad range of topics and I've really come to realize that this is something that impacts all different areas of life, and not just one specific thing and it's not just about what's on my TV or what's on my laptop. So I personally think that this is something that I would be interested in continuing to work in. Now that said, honestly just anything within activism and advocating for people and public advocacy. That's kind of the path that I want to go down. but this is something that is weighing on my heart now that I've gotten to encounter it.

**Peter:** What's next for both of you and for the institute? What are the projects that are in progress, coming to fruition? What headlines are you wanting to generate shortly and draw our attention to?

**Shea:** In about two weeks here, the IDH is actually going to be presenting at South by Southwest EDU down in Texas. So we're gonna be traveling down there. So that's something that we're super excited about and getting the opportunity to meet a lot of the different people that we can

be working with in the future. We're working on different avenues like predictive policing and continuing to push forward the facial recognition bans in Minnesota and things like that and nationally. but we're also just excited about the different curriculums that we get to put together. We have this Living Textbook project that keeps evolving as we as students grow and as we expand our horizons and I'm really excited to be able to educate more people and more students, but maybe Hannah can talk about some of the other things she's working on as well.

**Hannah:** Yeah, I'm doing some social media stuff for the IDH, a lot of research that's from filter bubbles to privacy. I know we're doing this big launch for South by Southwest, so that's like our main focus right now. But also have just done a couple interviews with some educators on their ideas and thoughts behind are different research about algorithms and filter bubbles and whatnot. So a lot of different moving parts, but like Shea said that I think the education piece, it's always moving because we're always in classes and always having conversations so that that's a big piece of ours as well.

**Peter:** It's been wonderful talking with both of you. I have said this before but I want to emphasize it for the audience that I found when I speak to schools and there's a mix obviously of students and faculty that usually the end result is that the students are engaged and the faculty is petrified by the message. And it's a challenge with older people to bring awareness of this topic without them ending up paralyzed. And I never find that with students, people like yourselves, and you have epitomized to me the engagement that I've experienced of students learning about these issues and grappling with them and taking them on - anything but paralyzed. And I'm really grateful to have had the chance to meet both of you and talk with you. So Shea Sullivan and Hannah Grubs of the Institute for Digital Humanity, thanks for coming on the show.

Thank you.

Thanks for having us.

That's the end of the interview. That's encouraged me a lot at a time when so much that's discouraging is going on, now of course with the war in Ukraine overshadowing just about everything else, and who knows what state that'll be in by the time this show comes out. We usually record three weeks in advance of airing, by the way. You can find out more about Shea and Hannah at the [IDH](#) and the link to that is in the transcript.

In today's news ripped from the headlines about AI, last summer researchers at Oregon State University in Corvallis, got a two-legged robot to run a 5k. Their robot is called Cassie, invented there and produced by their spinout, did the course in 53 minutes on a single charge. Cassie has knees that bend like an ostrich and taught itself to run with deep reinforcement learning. Now, standing upright is hard enough for humans – look at how easily we fall over – and running is even harder. Here's a pop quiz – what's the difference between running and walking? Think about it, pause if you need to. There's a really succinct way of describing the difference. Here it is. Walking is when you have at least one foot on the ground at all times, and running is when you have at most one foot on the ground at all times. Isn't that satisfying? But I have to say, based on that definition, Cassie is not running but walking quickly. You can see in the video Cassie, which looks like a pair of legs and a pelvis but nothing else, trotting around the campus,

pursued by a knot of students jogging behind it. One of them is doing some kind of remote control, probably to pick the general direction.

Next week my guest will be George Dyson, a renowned historian of computing and the author of the books *Darwin among the Machines* and *Turing's Cathedral*. 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>