AI Ethics Fail in Protecting Children from Engagement Harm

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Artificial Intelligence is advancing very fast, and it's transforming how we as humans interact with technology. All while offering us all the numerous benefits in various fields like education, entertainment, and healthcare. However, the increase in the presence of AI in children's lives raises important ethical concerns. In his paper "Challenges and Opportunities in Translating Ethical AI principles into Practice for Children", Ge Wang and his colleagues argue that recent AI ethics fail in considering children's specific and delicate needs from AI. Instead, AI treats children as a whole group under the broad title of "vulnerable populations". This AI strategy, according to Ge Wang, leads to having systems that neglect children's unique and important development periods, their mental abilities, and their privacy, causing potential harm instead of boosting their potentials. In this paper, I will support the author's claim that current AI systems lack adequate consideration of children's privacy. Focusing my point on real-world examples and utilitarian philosophical reasoning.

In his paper, Ge Wang, argues that treating children as a uniform group in AI ethics is a dangerous approach. Children are not smaller versions of adults. As their development stages, social environments, and capabilities vary widely from age to age. Ethical AI systems must have serious considerations when it comes to accounting for these differences to ensure fairness, safety, and inclusivity. For example, a 6-year old's needs and vulnerabilities are extremely different from those of a 16-year-old. However, AI still fails to differentiate between their stages of development. If it is looked at from a utilitarian point of view, which aims for maximizing

happiness while minimizing harm, this AI system is indeed harmful. Since for utilitarianism ethical actions should "aim to create the greatest benefit for the greatest number (Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill)". However, this is not the case when AI doesn't take into important consideration children's age restricted diverse needs. It risks causing more harm than good to the kids. For example, a teenager might be curious to look more into sexual health, even though such info might be age appropriate for 16–17-year-olds however, it is still grouped under "one-size-fits-all" approach AI has for children and teenagers. This exposes children to various topics that are not good for their health and might result in outcomes that are ethically unjustifiable.

AI's failure in differentiating between children and teenagers leads to inappropriate exposure that hinders children's privacy and well-being. Take for example the algorithms used in most social media apps that show content based entirely on engagement data collected. These types of systems might expose children to age restricted ads, promote violent games, or even show content that is designed for teenagers and not young children. These AI systems lack ethical consideration. Since young children don't necessarily have the maturity level of thinking to process all types of information, which could ultimately end up exposing children to emotional harm and possible manipulative content. For example, nowadays there is a rise in promoting addictive games in ways that would ultimately lead to having early struggle with self-regulation. This ultimately leads children to have a huge dependency on AI and technology emotionally, intellectually, and even physically. This doesn't only ethically harm children, but also jeopardizes their overall well-being. If AI systems, designed for children, fail to protect children from potential harmful content or expose them to unethical behaviors, then according to utilitarian analysis, AI's systems might lead to unjustifiable harmful consequences

AI's lack of having a child-specific system that has age restricted activities is evident in its data collecting apps/games. Take for example some AI apps that often collect data about children's preferences, interactions, and even require features like fingerprint or facial recognition, or even sound data. While this all seems unserious, it is very dangerous. And while this data is often used to improve user interaction, it goes unseen how easy it is to get info from children about their own private stuff. A concerning feature could be educational platforms that track children's progress and interactions. While these tools might be designed to enhance learning, however, the amount of data collected can be collected and sold to third parties. Above that, this info can be used to create detailed profiles of children without their knowledge. From a utilitarian perspective, the harm caused by such privacy policies far outweighs the benefits these apps provide. This unjustifiable leak of private information goes morally wrong.

A person might argue that parents/guardians must check over their children's usage of AI and put restrictions to prevent potential harm. In their opinion, AI doesn't have to distinguish between different age groups, but rather keep the responsibility for the parents to figure out how to properly restrict content from their children. While it is in no doubt important that parents must have active role in protecting their children against harmful content, however it places an unfair burden on parents to compensate for AI's ethical shortcomings. Not all parents are well educated to know about the potential harms, how content is recommended, or even how their children's data are being processed. Take as an example YouTube kids, an app made solely for children, however it got caught selling kid's data to third party apps (YouTube Collecting Child Info, The

Guardian). Above that, there have been situations where children got exposed to disturbing videos while using the app. Parents think these "kid-friendly" apps are safe without

acknowledging that these systems prioritize engagement over age suitability. It is AI's ethical responsibility to ensure that their design prioritizes children's developmental stages and minimizes harm. By putting the blame on parents, companies will then neglect their moral obligation to create ethical and age-appropriate systems.

Another potential counterargument is that applying age-appropriate AI systems might be financially and technically challenging. Above that, developing specific algorithms for different age groups would require companies to increase costs, it would slow innovation, and require many resources. They believe that it is far more practical to design systems that rely on users themselves to set their specific needs. Although these concerns do reflect on the real-world situation, they fail to justify the ethical neglect of children's needs. Technical and financial difficulties fail to outweigh the moral obligation to prevent harm to children. If the multi-millionaire companies can use their money to properly collect people's data, they can manage to make these systems adapt to age restricted content, away from harmful exposures. For example, AI can have stricter privacy protection settings for younger users, which shows content based on an age standard rather than algorithmic standard. From a utilitarian perspective, the long-term benefits of age-restricted systems far outweighs the short-term costs. This develops moral trust in AI technologies between users and systems. Companies that prioritize ethical design would contribute to greater user happiness and serve the best for all users, especially the vulnerable ones.

It is crucial that AI systems recognize that children must be protected from harmful content on their platforms. Treating all users under a single general grouping is morally unacceptable and it hinders trust between users and AI. This failure in protecting children violates ethical AI principles and contradicts utilitarian ideals of maximizing well-being and minimizing harm. These AI developers play a huge role in adding responsible technical barriers that must overcome in pursuit of ethical design. Only by working on these issues can AI fulfill its potential to improve children's lives ethically and responsibly.