

September 16, 2022

## Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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### What we're thinking about

Last week Google CEO [Sundar Pichai announced](#) that he wants to make Google 20% more productive. With an uncertain macroeconomic picture, big companies like Google, Microsoft, and Meta are freezing hiring and thinking about ways to boost employee productivity. What Pichai didn't outline was how Google plans to measure this productivity.

But he and many company leaders have more and more tools at their disposal to track every move of their employees. [The New York Times](#) reported last month on the rise of the workplace productivity score, using an interactive article that mimics the way employers are increasingly surveilling employees across industries and income levels.

Employee monitoring and surveillance has been common in lower-paying jobs for years. Eight of the top 10 largest private employers track the productivity of their employees (the performance of Amazon warehouse employees is tracked so closely that [many are afraid to take bathroom breaks](#)).

But with the rise of digital tracking tools, workplace surveillance is expanding into higher-paying white-collar jobs as well. In the early days of the pandemic when people began to work from home, [sales of workplace surveillance software tripled](#). Employers can track keystrokes, mouse movements, phone location data, and even emotions via audio or video.

It's no coincidence that the rise of remote work has ushered in an invasion of our privacy as we work from home. [Paul Wartenberg](#), who installs monitoring systems for clients, said "If we're going to give up on bringing people back to

the office, we're not going to give up on managing productivity." With more and more people working from home, employers have lost the ability to physically monitor their employees, which has led to an increase in digital surveillance.

Surveillance raises ethical and privacy concerns and challenges fundamental human rights, according to [Randolph Lewis](#), a researcher and professor studying surveillance in America. But it's also unclear if surveillance actually increases productivity, or if it's ultimately counterproductive. The ACLU published an [analysis](#) last month citing research that surveillance causes stress and anxiety for people. Another study referenced that less surveillance by bosses actually might increase worker productivity because workers were more nervous, less creative, and less efficient when they were being watched.

Companies might be under pressure to boost employee productivity, but digital surveillance software might not be accurate in capturing such productivity gains. Not only does it reduce productivity metrics to monitoring keystrokes and mouse movements, but it also can create adversarial dynamics where employees bristle at their boss looking over their shoulder.


[After implementing surveillance tools, one CEO said](#) "My workers had ethical concerns and felt like we were violating their privacy. One of my employees raised the concern that we don't trust our employees. I noticed that it was building resentment among them and decreasing employee morale immensely."

As workplace privacy decreases, systems to protect employees are not yet in place. [Ifeoma Ajunwa](#), a law professor at the University of North Carolina, said that most states have "carte blanche in how to implement these technologies to surveil workers." The laws on employee surveillance and privacy in the workplace simply haven't caught up to the fast-changing technology.

The invasion of employee privacy might speak to a deeper level of organizational dysfunction: mistrust within teams and between bosses and their employees. Companies might win the productivity battle but lose the retention war as employees leave for less adversarial work environments where trust and privacy are prized.



## Other notable headlines

 The Responsible Innovation Team at Meta has been cut. Meta originally formed the team to address potential downsides and ethical issues with products connected to Facebook and Instagram. Composed of about 20 engineers and ethicists, the Responsible Innovation Team worked with internal product teams and external privacy specialists, academics, and users to identify and address concerns throughout the company's platforms. [The Wall Street Journal](#) reports that while Meta remains committed to the Responsible

Innovation Team's mission and goals, it is reallocating ethical design resources to issue-specific teams.

📺 Will we see the rise of the digital nation state? As the internet forms communities and affinity groups distributed across the globe but united in common interest or cause, [Wired](#) highlights the provocative views of techno-optimist thinker Balaji Srinivasan. According to Srinivasan, the world is moving towards a virtual governance structure — the network state — where like-minded people build internet-native economies with internet-native currencies, self organizing into a new geopolitical force for the digital age.

📺 In 2012, YouTube launched an initiative called “Nutritious and Delicious” that assigned a “goodness” score to wholesome videos. [Big Technology](#) reports on how YouTube teams prompted users to watch videos that weren't detestable or addictive, but considered time well spent. The initiative slowly lost steam as YouTube tried to compete with other growing tech giants like Facebook for market share. In 2019 amidst the social media backlash, YouTube again began to shape its algorithm to guide users to videos considered more valuable and wholesome. But once more, the need to compete with new forms of social media has led Youtube to restructure its algorithm to drive view time to YouTube Shorts, bite-sized videos aimed to compete with TikTok. Of note, [Alex Kantrowitz](#), the writer of Big Technology, will be interviewing [Frances Haugen](#) (Facebook whistleblower) at Unfinished Live for his upcoming podcast next week.

📺 In this [Linkedin op-ed](#), European Commissioner Thierry Breton outlines Europe's approach to thriving in the metaverse: 1) virtual spaces must embed European values of safety, interoperable standards, and limits on control and power over virtual public squares; 2) Europe must remain at the cutting edge by mastering and developing new technologies like AR and VR; and 3) Europe needs to invest in a resilient connectivity infrastructure to accommodate the data powering virtual spaces. (You have read before about our own efforts with [Project Liberty](#) to address many of these issues, including making our social networks interoperable by default with the new protocol DSNP).

## 💡 Funding & Support Available for Ethical AI Startups

[Newlab's Ethical AI Studio](#) is seeking early-stage technology companies working to integrate and scale their ethical AI products to create safer gaming and metaverse spaces or enable inclusive and transparent algorithms for life-sciences and healthcare.

In partnership with [Globant](#) and the [Be Kind Tech Fund](#), Newlab's Studio offers structured pilot opportunities for startups to integrate and scale their ethical AI solution hand-in-hand with Globant's technical teams, clients, and

investment fund. Selected companies will also have access to Globant's 600 angel investors interested in early stage deep-tech companies.

**Applications close on Sept 21st.** 5-7 companies will be selected to join the Studio and receive a share of \$100,000 in pilot stipends and strategic support to advance a pilot project with Globant. No equity is taken for participation.

Apply [here](#). Have questions? Contact [ethicalai@newlab.com](mailto:ethicalai@newlab.com). The Newlab team will attend Unfinished live in person next week. Feel free to schedule an in-person meeting in advance with their team during the event through the email provided.

## Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend. We won't be writing a newsletter next week because we'll be at Unfinished Live. Hope to see you there!

The Unfinished team

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