

Transparency in the age of AI: A conversation with Acquia's Buytaert

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Artificial intelligence is quickly becoming the next big thing in the tech world. Major companies are investing in the tech, and more and more we're finding AI built into our day-to-day lives.

Dries Buytaert, founder of Drupal and chief technology officer at Acquia, is excited to see where AI is going and feels it could be the next big disruptor in the tech world. However, there are concerns and challenges to consider along the way.

"It has the opportunity of being sort of the next big platform for creating both user experiences as well as distributing both content and services," Buytaert said of AI. "All of the big tech companies are investing heavily toward this – Amazon, Facebook, Google specifically – they're all making pretty large bets on these technologies," Buytaert told FierceCIO.



Dries Buytaert

As the tech grows, change will be inevitable. Major technology changes can "cause pretty big shifts everywhere. ... They change how people create content. They also change how people create customer journeys. They also create new business models," he observed.

Buytaert feels that the last major technology change to have a major impact on both user experiences and distributing content and services was the move to mobile. Suddenly, the world had a new technology that was integrated into the day-to-day lives of average people. Companies had to adjust user experiences and content to mobile platforms, Drupal included.

Buytaert explained that AI could be the new mobile.

However, there are plenty of concerns when it comes to AI. Those concerns extend to algorithms that companies use for creating user experiences and distributing content.

"Increasingly, more of our lives depend on these algorithms. And increasingly, we're finding out that companies have been cheating with their algorithms," Buytaert explained. For example, recently Facebook was found to have bias in its news reporting algorithms. In addition, Volkswagen's emissions algorithm was found to offer untrue emissions readings.

In Buytaert's opinion, more transparency is needed. "There's a bigger conversation around algorithmic transparency in my opinion and open source could be part of the solution." With open source, the code is completely open for everyone to review, resulting in far less room for secrets.

However, the tech community alone may not be able to solve the problem.

"It's not something we can just fix in the technology community. I think eventually it will take the government to be involved," Buytaert said, explaining that a governing body similar to the Food and Drug Administration could be helpful when facing the challenges AI and algorithms bring about.

Ultimately, however, it's not clear who should be held responsible when AI tech is used to do harm. For example, Microsoft's Twitter-based chatbot Tay was taught within a matter of hours to beam out racist Tweets to the world.

"I don't think Microsoft meant to do harm," Buytaert said, adding in that companies need to take care of the situation immediately, as Microsoft did in shutting Tay down.

"As developers, you can't necessarily expect all of the use cases of your software and what the software will learn. ... It does raise a big ethical question," Buytaert said. "Can they prevent it? I don't know. ... I think people should try to prevent it and then when they fail to prevent something, companies should react very quickly. But this is where maybe a governance body can help."

Of course, once all the bumps and bruises of AI and algorithms are on the way to healing, there is huge potential for the technology.

"What's exciting to me is that we can do a lot of great things too. ... The positive impact is bigger than the negative impact as a whole," Buytaert explained. "I think it can change every industry. I think it can change every country. I think it can change every life on earth when it's used well."