

As ethical AI teams proliferate, will Big Tech listen?

Article

The news: Some of Big Tech's biggest critics will be heading up Twitter's Machine learning, Ethics, Transparency, and Accountability (META) ethical AI team, **according to** Protocol.

- Earlier this year the notorious AI researcher **Rumman Chowdhury** **announced** she'd lead Twitter's META team.

- **Kristian Lum**, a **professor** known for her **research** on the use of machine learning models in criminal justice, is reportedly joining as Twitter's new head of research.
- **Sarah Roberts**, the **current** co-director of the Center for Internet Inquiry at UCLA, will join as a consultant for the META team.
- All of this reportedly came after Twitter machine learning engineer **Ari Font** convinced CEO **Jack Dorsey** and Twitter's board of directors to make responsible machine learning one of the company's main 2021 priorities.

More on this: Ethical considerations in AI are **increasingly** important as it becomes intertwined with everyday life—and as a **growing** body of **research** highlights the **litany** of racial and gender biases baked into the tech.

Demand for AI among businesses is surging as well: Some **32%** of global organizations have AI initiatives in production, up from 11% in 2019, according to IDC data **via** The Wall Street Journal.

Why this matters: Twitter's move follows Google's controversial firing of several high-profile ethical AI researchers, which has led to public **discussion** of the role algorithms play in fomenting **divisiveness** and **spreading** misinformation.

- Last December, Google allegedly **fired** the co-leader of its ethical AI team **Timnet Gebru** over a research **paper** looking into biases in Google's AI models.
- Three months later, Google **fired** the team's other co-leader, **Margaret Mitchell**, for allegedly moving files outside the company. Mitchell **reportedly** used an automated script to comb through her emails in order to find evidence of discrimination against Gebru.
- Since then, more than **2,600 Google employees** have **signed** a letter demanding transparency into the handling of Gebru's research and her ultimate firing.

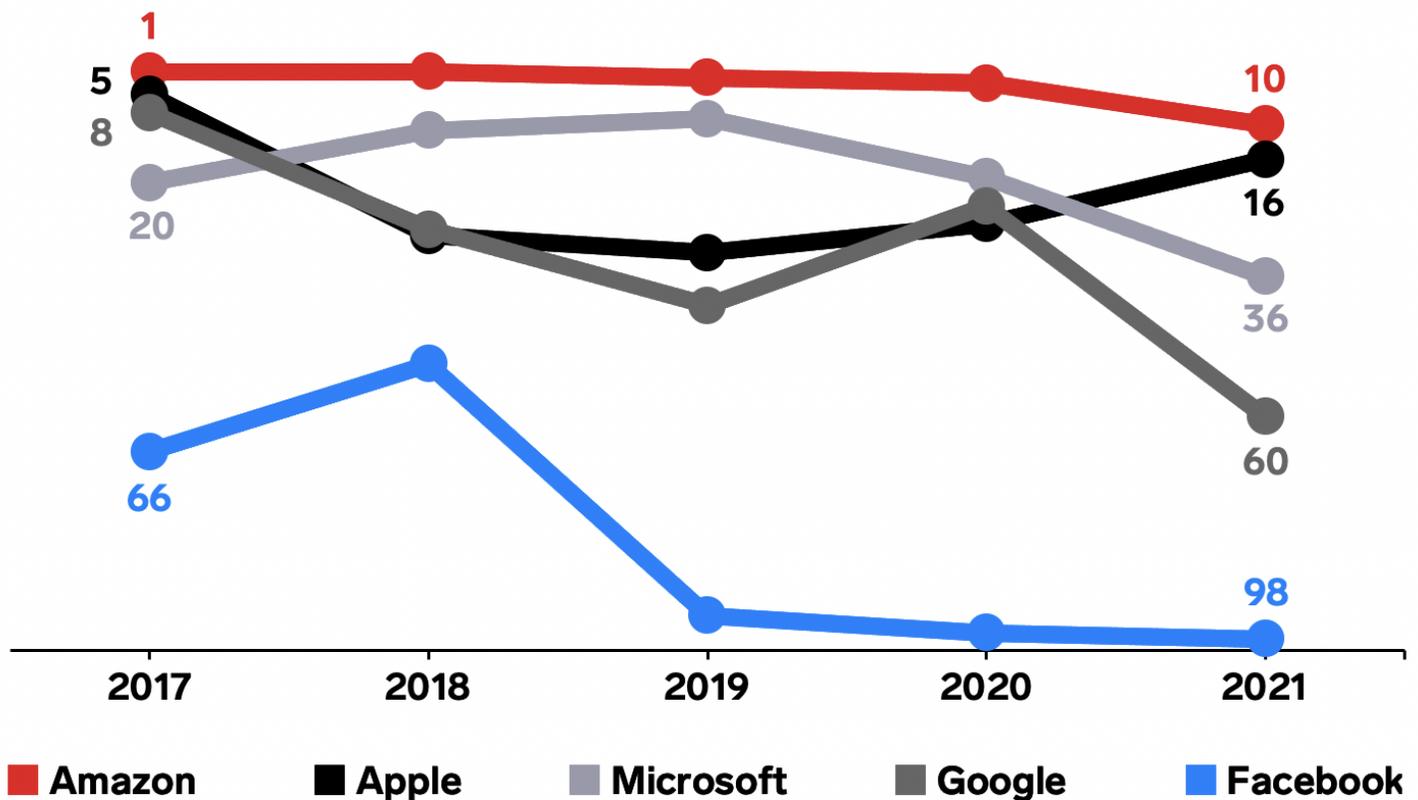
The takeaway: Simply forming ethics teams isn't enough. Twitter and other tech companies need to listen to and ultimately enact proposals from their ethics team if they wish to build back trust, both from within their own ranks and from the broader public.

Though AI ethics teams are on the **rise** in tech, it's still **unclear** whether or not these teams will have much say—if any—in how their companies make decisions. Refusal by tech companies to meaningfully engage with these teams, beyond achieving merely the surface-level appearance of ethical concern, risks further erosion of the industry's already **frayed** public trust. Big Tech

firms, in particular, have recently taken a **major** reputational **beating**. As Chowdhury **told** The Wall Street Journal: "A lot of companies have burned through their trust capital."

Technology Company Reputation Rankings, April 2021

relative ranking by reputation from 1 to 100



Source: Axios/Harris, May 2021
Methodology: The Axios Harris Poll 100 is based on a survey of 42,935 US adults in a nationally representative sample conducted April 8–21, 2021. The Axios Harris poll first identifies the 100 most visible companies and then ranks them based on what respondents think of them.

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