

**Putting a Face to the Name:
Portraits of Computers, Ethics, and Public Policy in the Workplace**

**CS 181: Computers, Ethics, and Public Policy
Professors Mehran Sahami, Rob Reich, and Jeremy Weinstein
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*Interviewed and Edited by Antigone Xenopoulos***

Joshua Browder

Joshua Browder is the founder of DoNotPay, a chatbot that serves as an AI lawyer to help people dispute parking tickets and flight refunds. Beyond this primary purpose, Browder intends to expand the platform to help users sue, and get money back from, anyone they wish. DoNotPay was founded in 2016 and has received \$1.1 million in seed funding from the Venture Capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. Browder was featured in Forbes 30 Under 30 in the Law & Policy Class of 2017. Browder will graduate from Stanford University in 2019 with a BS in Computer Science in the HCI track.

Describe your academic and extracurricular interests at Stanford and before.

I'm a Stanford student in the Computer Science department studying on the AI track. Outside of class, I would like to hopefully replace lawyers with technology, starting with very simple things like arguing against parking tickets and then moving towards things like pressing a button and suing someone or pressing a button and getting a divorce.

Describe your background in tech. What attracted you to the industry?

Originally, I loved to hack iPhones when I was about 12 or 13. It made me realize that just as one person you can have a huge impact on society by doing very little. No one has to give you permission to make something and that's what has always attracted me to tech.

What companies have you worked at or launched? What is your latest project and what is its mission?

I worked as an engineer for a few big companies, including Pret a Manger in the U.K., and a few think tanks in Washington D.C., including Freedom House. It was really great to have all this impact just as a young person.

Right now, my own company is called Do Not Pay and although it's free for users, I'm trying to make it commercially sustainable.

Could you tell us a little more about Do Not Pay: where the idea came from, how it's played out, and where you see its future going?

I started it when I got 30 parking tickets in the UK when I was in high school at about 18 years old, the driving age. I couldn't pay for any of the tickets.

I probably deserved them, but because I couldn't afford them, I created software for myself and my friends to get out of them. I really just expected it to end there. But it turns out everyone in the world hates parking tickets.

This made me realize that a robot lawyer that not only helps with parking tickets but as many legal issues as possible would really be helpful to people. Now it works in about a dozen legal areas. Everything from fighting your landlord, to parking tickets, to immigration, to travel, and soon it will be launching to help people fight big loan companies and insurance companies.

It's a chat bot, which is a piece of software that talks to you. It figures out your legal issue, takes down details, and then uses very simple AI and algorithms to insert that information into generic documents which will hopefully help you with your issue. And the long-term vision is that you'll never need lawyer again. Obviously if you're in a corporation, maybe you will still need a lawyer, but for a consumer they won't even know what the word lawyer means.

How has Stanford furthered your interest in tech or enabled the pursuit of it, if at all? In pursuing this path, what tools have been at your disposal as a Stanford student?

I like to think of Stanford as one big conference that goes on forever. The reason is that the most amazing thing about Stanford is the people. Every day, I meet really inspiring people who give me new ideas, make me think I should be thinking bigger. It's not just the professors, it's the students as well.

To whom and for what are companies primarily responsible to and for?

I think they're responsible for everything they do. There's this really interesting lawsuit going on in the U.K. now where a big TV producer has sued Facebook because there are lots of scam advertisements featuring his face. I think that that's just the perfect example of how tech companies aren't taking enough responsibility for the actions that they cause. They just need to make slightly less profits and invest in not ruining the world. Lots of tech companies say, "oh, we're just a platform," but in reality, they're no different than other companies which have a responsibility in the real world.

Do mission-driven technology companies have responsibilities beyond the law and increasing profits for shareholders? If so, what are they? Do you maintain Milton Friedman's thesis that the responsibility of a corporation is simply to increase revenue?

Mission-driven technology companies definitely have responsibilities beyond the law and increasing profits for shareholders. I think that all companies should do that ideally, but especially mission driven companies. I really like B Corporations, because I think that gives the legal structure to do it, but even C-Corporations should do so as well.

A B-Corporation is a for-profit corporate entity offering a positive impact on society, workers, community, and the environment, in addition to profit, in its legally defined goals.

I absolutely do not maintain Friedman's thesis. I think that any corporation that thinks like that won't do well in the long term. That's why I think Facebook will perhaps see even more trouble in the future.

Do you think that social responsibility in the private sector extends beyond tech, or do you think it's something unique to the tech industry?

I think it's unique to the tech industry just because of the scale that software can have an impact on. I think if you're a laundromat business, even with a thousand stores, there's not much you can do wrong. Whereas if you're an online platform with millions of pieces of content posted every hour, then there's a lot more that could go wrong.

Are individual software engineers morally responsible for their contributions to their companies' products? Why or why not?

Well, on the one hand, the world is a tough place and it's hard to get a job. If someone tells you what to do and you don't do it, then you could lose your job when you have a family to support. On the other hand, I think in extreme cases engineers are responsible. For example, the Volkswagen engineers who programmed the emissions test bypass are obviously responsible; they should go to jail.

But, I think if you're a Facebook engineer, then you're not really responsible because you're just a small part of something that you have no control over. So, I think it depends. I think the line should be drawn with the law. If the company is doing something that's currently illegal, then there's absolutely no way engineers should do it.

However, everyone has a different set of ethics, unfortunately. I think if an individual engineer wants to go against a company just based on his or her ethical grounds, there should be a discussion about it. But it's a difficult situation to put the engineer in because that's his or her livelihood.

Do you believe that there should be an effort to develop some sort of uniform code of ethics for the tech industry?

I think it should be some formal process, but I don't think it should just be the industry leaders in the companies. I think other representatives, like professors and non-profits, need to get involved because if the industry leaders are just regulating themselves, then nothing is going to get done. I think self-regulation could work in cases where the law is taking too long to catch up, but I think the best regulation is just shining a spotlight on anything that goes wrong. We've seen that with the press: the press is the biggest weapon before regular, true regulation comes in.

Was there a culture of contemplating or discussing the potentially harmful ethical or social consequences of technology at any firm you have worked at or run? If there was, how and how frequently did this culture manifest itself? If there was not, what do you think prevented such a culture from emerging?

I have a lot of values myself, so with my small company we don't have those issues.

But in the past, I've seen things that I wouldn't necessarily agree with. And as an intern what I'd try to do is take advantage of the fact that the people making the decisions higher up are often not that technical. So that's how individual engineers could actually have more power, by saying, for instance, "oh, well it's not actually that feasible to collect that data," even when it is. So, you could kind of bend the truth, tell a white lie for the sake of ethics. That's one strategy I've found.

I think interns generally are the best ethical whistleblowers because they're not part of the corporate establishment yet. Once you start taking the free food for years on end... it wears down your ethical boundaries.

Is there a culture of contemplating or discussing the potentially harmful ethical or social consequences of technology at Stanford? If there is, where, how, and how frequently does this culture manifest itself? If there is not, what do you think has prevented such a culture from emerging?

I feel like there are two extremes. On the one hand, there's the ethics club extreme, like CS+Ethics, where everyone talks about it... and thinks about it every day. But on the other hand, there are a majority of Stanford students, engineers, who don't actually think about it at all, they just want to get the highest paying internship. It's really unfortunate that students don't think that way.

Everyone is very self-serving in what they're trying to do. For example, the Fountain Hopper sends an email to every student without their permission. Similarly, other organizations, just do what they want, whatever's possible. So, I think this creates a culture of the ends justifying the means. But that's often not the case. I've seen, especially with individual students and the projects they're working on, they don't really think about where this could go and what impact it has or could have... There are these great groups that actually spend all the time thinking about these issues. But often, that's separate from the people actually doing these slightly unethical projects. It's nothing really bad, but just borderline. But I worry that that creates a habit: in the future, maybe they'll go even farther.

Everyone is busy. Everyone has objectives. When things get rough, ethics are the easiest thing to cut out. If you're like Stanford in Government, for example, and you need to push out a new application process, the thing that you're least worried about is encryption of the applications because you just need to get it done. I think it's just time constraints and Stanford students are generally very busy. So, it's really not a concern, unfortunately.

Stanford does just prepare a lot of students to be cogs at Google and Facebook, which I was really surprised about. It's a bit unfortunate and I don't think they have any ethical inclinations either way, but I think they'll just do what they're told.

What knowledge would you impart on current students hoping to enter the tech world, whether through software engineering or otherwise?

Do your own project. You'll get a lot more out of it, ethics or otherwise, just because when someone is telling you what to do, they are obviously going to be things that you disagree with. So, if you want to have complete control, try starting something yourself.