

# THE WEEK

MAGAZINE

## What is moral architecture and can it fix our digital world?

Global gloom is intensifying as most people face inflation and inequality, while corporate greed and opaque technology create a widespread moral crisis



*By Anita Pratap* Issue Date: December 14, 2025

The world is in a mess” is a common lament across the world. Not everyone agrees though, certainly not the ones who contribute to the mess or those who thrive on it, and certainly not the moneyed M&Ms of the world—Microsoft and Mercedes, Mark and Musk. But, then, they are not of this world anyway. They inhabit a distant galaxy. While most people feel the pincer pinch of inflation, infection and inequality, trillionaires’ wealth rockets to MoM-z14, the farthest observed galaxy, 33.8 billion light-years from planet earth.

Experts attribute many reasons for this global gloom. War, polarisation, corruption, aggressive geopolitics and AI. People feel online trends have aggravated this mess. But, 25 years ago, when the internet dawned into our lives, the world brimmed with optimism, expectations and possibilities. “But that optimism has curdled into cynicism,” mourns Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia’s co-founder. So, what went wrong? Wales answers, “The defining difference between web 1.0 and the platforms that dominate today is not technological sophistication but moral architecture.”

Moral architecture depends on good governance. Algorithms and AI determine the content consumed by billions of users. They are a force for good, but how they function remains opaque. Wales argues for implementing “structural transparency”, or clearly outlining “where data originated, how it is processed and what uncertainty” surrounds it. He says, “Think of it as nutritional labelling for information.”



Illustration: Deni Lal

But powerful forces strive to strangle AI regulation. The troika of Silicon Valley lobbyists, \$100 million moneybags and slick spin-doctors hatched a plan, backed by Donald Trump, to restrict US states from regulating AI companies. MAGA supporters and even some Republicans accuse Trump of appeasing Big Tech donors. Senator Josh Hawley, a Republican hawk, sniggers, “Shows what money can do.”

Money is doing terrible things everywhere, adding to global gloom. Tuna is big business with a \$50 billion global market. But tuna-fishing fleets starve, overwork, beat their “bonded” migrant crew, who haul fishing lines that stretch for kilometres on voyages that last for years. “Abuse on these vessels is industrial, systemic,” says human rights investigator, Steve Trent.

Luxury brands tolerate worker abuse by subcontractors. A South African government probe reveals the nexus between rogue police officials and gangsters who bribe the judiciary, swindle state hospitals of millions of dollars and terrorise honest officials by “threatening to burn them in their cars”.

Moral crisis in football has led to rampant illegal betting, match-fixing and on-field punching. “Football does not take place in outer space. The scandals are a magnifying glass of all the problems in today’s society, especially the erosion of the rule of law, lack of transparency, accountability and legal impunity,” bemoans Turkish sociologist Daghan Irak.

The internet, today, is a microcosm, spawning good solutions and bad problems ranging from predatory apps to data centres’ guzzling of precious water, teenage suicides after conversations with chatbots to societal dangers from scams, financial bubbles and job losses. Wales says the best way to survive this onslaught is to embed transparency, independence and empathy into the digital architecture itself. “It was done before. It can be done again,” he promises.

But when big money talks, public good walks—away. Collective will to restore sense and sensibility seems feeble. Solutions sound like closing the door after the horse has bolted. The stallions of the universe gallop beyond MoM-z14 while earthlings, saddled with messy problems, can never catch up. Astronomers say MoM is unreachable, receding from earth due to cosmic expansion. The phenomenon—and the distance—is cosmological. And metaphorical.

**Pratap is an author and journalist**