

# TALKIN' ABOUT AN AI REVOLUTION

Twenty-year-old DoNotPay creator Joshua Browder is harnessing the power of chatbots for social good.



Rachel Botsman is a global authority on the power of collaboration and trust.

**T**he world's first chatbot lawyer has been used by more than 250,000 people in the UK and New York to challenge parking fines. The DoNotPay bot was created by 20-year-old Joshua Browder, a British programming wunderkind studying economics and computer science at Stanford University, after he received "countless" tickets himself.

If you want to challenge a parking ticket because, say, the signs were confusing, you simply log on to donotpay.co.uk. A chatbot then asks a series of simple questions using a Facebook Messenger-like interface to determine the validity of the notice. Based on the user's answers, it generates a legal appeal. The bot has successfully appealed approximately 65 per cent of all claims it has handled, saving people about \$US6 million (\$7.9 million) in avoided fines.

Browder has recently focused his attention to fight another massive social problem: helping refugees. In March 2017, after months of working with lawyers, he launched a bot that can help refugees fill in an immigration application in the US and Canada or help those in the UK apply for asylum support. He started working on the project before Donald Trump won the US presidential election but he thinks the helpful bot is needed now more than ever.

The young entrepreneur receives numerous requests from people who need help with all kinds of legal issues, from the legality of killing badgers to tenancy issues to help claiming money for delayed flights.

Browder has also been approached by numerous law firms and insurance companies about commercialising the chatbot technology. But for now, he wants to empower a large number of people to deal with legal issues without lawyers and fees.

## **Where did you get the idea of using technology to fight social justice issues?**

Before I did any of my own projects I worked for human rights organisations like Freedom House in the United States to try to learn the ins and outs of social good technology. When I was there, I realised that there's virtually no technology in the industry. Most groups will have a website, but that's about it.

## **How did DoNotPay gain traction from helping a handful of family and friends to helping thousands of people appeal parking tickets?**

I created DoNotPay as a side project in my community. Everyone started using it because apparently a lot of people get parking tickets. It spread through word of mouth and social media. Then once it became very popular, all the media outlets covered it almost overnight and it went viral.

## **When did you realise the potential of your bot to solve problems other than parking tickets?**

It emerged after I saw the traction with tickets. I'd receive questions and personal messages through the contact form on my website asking for individualised help on evictions and repossessions, for example. This gave me the idea to expand the bot to be able to help with tenancy issues that can lead to homelessness.

## **How do you prioritise what issue to focus on?**

It's based on the volume of requests but also on the use case. There's a lot to be done in the area of consumer rights issues and other systemic social issues such as helping refugees getting asylum. I'd love to help someone get a home with a bot, that's the ultimate gratification.

## **You are asking people to trust a bot to handle their legal issues. What are the key things that users have to know before they take the leap?**

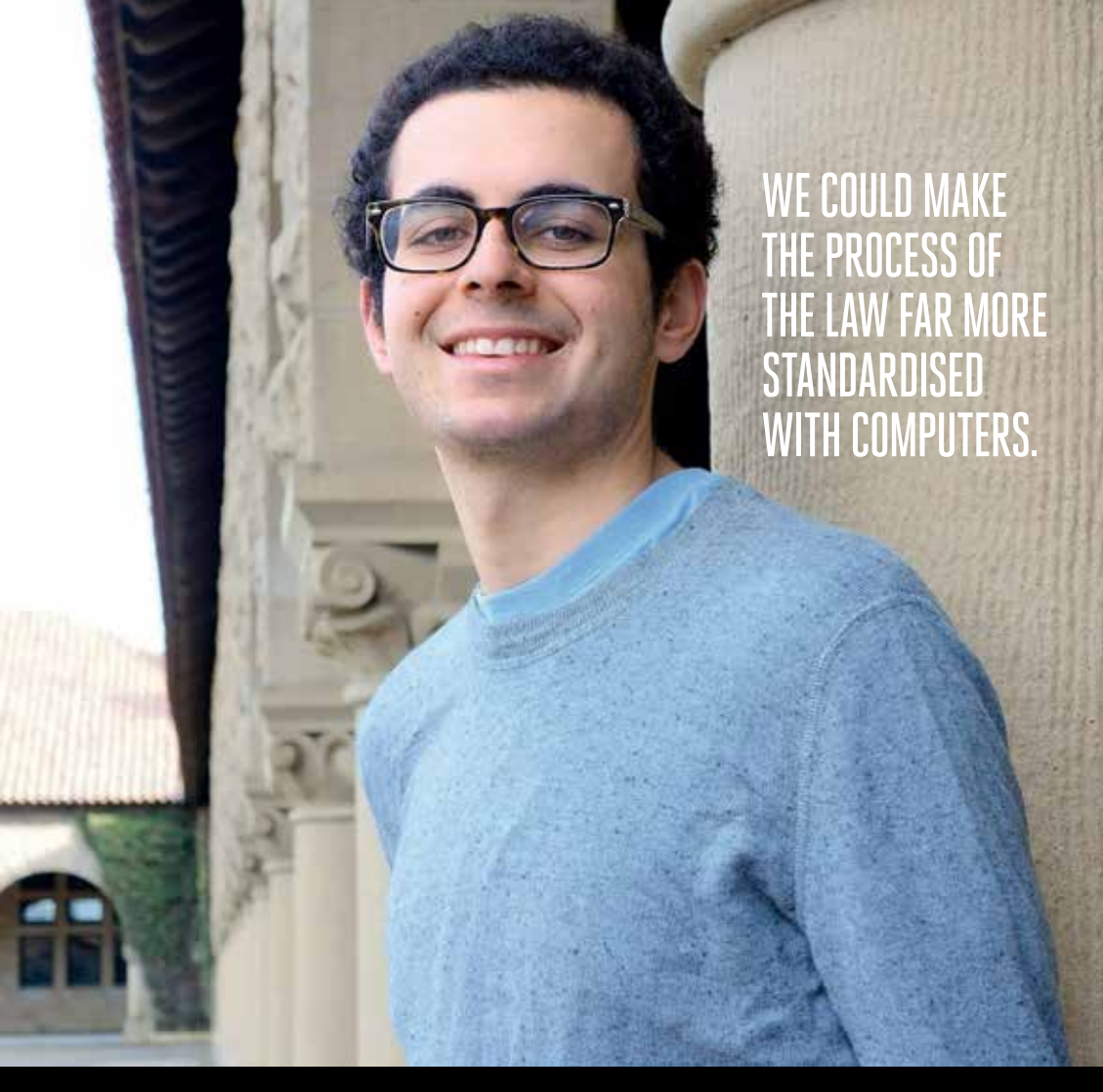
The average person doesn't even know what a bot is so they want to know there won't be any harm using it or any hidden fees. For most people using my service, it's the first bot they've used. It's important to introduce them to the idea and not make everything too complicated, to make the experience human. People also want to know it works, so we publish the bot's success numbers, which are high.

## **What's the process of understanding a new social issue and coding legal assistance into a bot?**

I've got some lawyers helping me and I'll ask them how to get started with a particular issue. They'll often send me some generic forms and letters they use. Then I work with some designers to help come up with the right language and questions the bot should ask to make it a human experience. I spend around three months coding it all up. By the end of it, the product is tested by lawyers and real users.

## **What is the most challenging part of the process?**

It's making sure the language of the bot is useable and easy enough to understand for people. All the forms have so much jargon within them. There's a fine line between ensuring the bot asks a legally



WE COULD MAKE THE PROCESS OF THE LAW FAR MORE STANDARDISED WITH COMPUTERS.

accurate question and making it use language that people understand. Sometimes if you make it too simple then it will be hard for it to be legally accurate. On the other hand, if you ask exactly what the form says then people won't understand.

**How do you prevent people from regarding the bot as a silver bullet that can be used to get themselves out of sticky legal situations?**

Take parking tickets. In most of the UK you still have to submit the appeal document yourself to the council. If the appeal fails, users have to either pay the parking fine or take it to the next stage of appeal. That creates responsibility. Once the bot starts submitting the appeal document there is this sense of diminished responsibility on the part of the user.

**Do you think there's a danger of people losing their skills in resolving issues as they rely more on bots?**

In the US, 80 per cent of the legal needs of those who can't afford it go unmet, according to Legal Services Corporation. They lack the skills to do it themselves and end up being harassed by the legal system. I think people already lack the skills and the knowledge; the bot is solving that problem rather than creating a new problem.

**How do you ensure your bot always acts ethically?**

I hadn't thought about this until a few weeks ago. I opened up my bot platform so anyone could build a bot on DoNotPay without any technical knowledge, just by uploading a document, specifying the variables and writing questions for the variables. Then a bot would be created. One of my biggest concerns was that people would create bots that help you access drugs or evade taxes. At the moment I'm getting around that by manually reviewing every one of the bots. But obviously that's not sustainable as more and more people use the platform.

**What's one of the best pieces of advice you've received that has helped you stay on the right course for DoNotPay?**

In Silicon Valley there's this bubble where people are focusing on getting to the next fundraising milestone and getting higher valuations rather than focusing on building really great products. LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman taught me there's no badge of honour that should be associated with fundraising.

At the time, I had gained traction with my products and was getting all these offers from VCs and I thought maybe it was time to start fundraising. But then I decided to step back, focus on the product, and explore what more I could do with it instead.

## HACK THE MINDSET: JOSHUA'S RULES

1

Have strong opinions that are weakly held: be open to changing your thinking as you read and learn more about the ecosystem of the problem and the technology.

2

Don't exploit people: if you do things like overcharge people or lie, it's never going to end up well for both you and everyone else.

3

Find inspiration from people around you: if you surround yourself with friends who are doing amazing things, you'll be able to learn so much from them.

### How do you use bots in your own life?

Aside from the bots I create, I use Sensay, Clara and Uber's bot. I'm creating a personal bot to manage my interview requests and emails from people who want to ask advice on how to create bots.

### What stage are we at in realising the full potential of bots?

There are so many bots out there that help people order pizzas or flowers. Many companies are using bots just as marketing tools in ways that undermines trust in the whole ecosystem. I think bots have so much more potential. The most successful bots for me are the ones that do things that were previously inaccessible. For example, there's one that gives anonymous support to sexual assault survivors and one that helps diagnose the Zika virus.

### Which human tasks do you hope people will outsource to a bot?

I hope that people will start to question why humans are involved with courtroom verdicts. Because sentencing is based on human judgments, they could become inaccurate and biased. It's been proven that there's bias with race in terms of granting bail in the United States. But bots don't really care about your race or accent, or anything like that. We could make the process of the law far more standardised and fair with computers.

### What is your advice for young people who are looking for ways to help people?

The thing I love about focusing on social good is that there's a guaranteed user base because none of this has been done before. As long as what you build is useful for people, it's really going to take off.