Question:

“How was data analysis used as part of trend forecasting and what, in your view, were the main factors that led to the failure to predict the flu pandemic in the US, and subsequently the disparagement of the model.”

In addition you are expected to be able to determine if the situation could have been avoid, if so, how? If not, why not?

Data analysis is the process of checking information for potential trends, or specific information.

Trend forecasting is a term used in many different industries, from fashion through to data analysis. “Trend forecasting is the art and science of predicting the future direction of something. This can be done with analysis of existing data to try spot the emergence of a trend.” (Spacey, 2015)

With this in mind, this essay will look into how data analysis is used for trend forecasting.

Around ninety million American adults are believed to search online about specific diseases or medical problems each year. In an attempt to provide faster detection, a system was proposed to find influenza-related search queries in order to build up a database of queries. (Ginsberg, et al., 2008)

Google implemented a model which analysed search data for flu and other related searches, which was launched in 2008. Alongside this, it was predicted that “Google web search queries can be used to accurately estimate influenza-like illness percentages in each of the nine public health regions of the United States” (Ginsberg, et al., 2008).

Google Suggest, a system in which Google predicts your search query, was introduced in 2008. (Sullivan, 2008) This system allowed users to quickly search terms with Google Search offering recommended searches based on what they’ve already typed. This had unintended effects on the Google Flu algorithm, causing higher than normal catches of flu searches.

This, alongside the “concerned people were reacting to heightened media coverage” caused disproportionate web searches for flu. (Copeland, et al., 2013)

In my view, I believe the main factors that led to the failure to predict the flu pandemic in the US is mainly the hysterical nature of media coverage. “It appears that the mainstream news has an obsession with fear mongering” (Sibiski, 2016) Media’s obsession with overblowing news leads many of the population to overreacting to many different issues in the world, pandemics and illness being one of them.

This would mean that the Google flu model would have to accurately filter out the genuine search queries from the ones as a result of media hype. It was discussed that Google would introduce a dampener to reduce the spike caused by media coverage. (Copeland, et al., 2013)

I believe ultimately the issue could not have been avoided, as media has overhyped many issues, and as a result people react hysterically. Even if google was to filter out these results, there would still be the issue of Google Suggest overestimating the search results.

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