

Ethics of Representation

Dharnish B.R., Connor A.

Introduction

- Book name: Technically Wrong: Sexist Apps, Biased Algorithms, and Other Threats of Toxic Tech
- Written by **Sara Wachter-Boettcher**
- Diversity, representation, algorithmic bias, freedom of choice, privacy



The Problem: Representation in Tech

- According to the author, the tech industry is not representative of the general population.
- It skews heavily towards male, young, white (and Asian), and able-bodied.
- All efforts towards diversification on part of tech companies have yielded unsatisfactory results
 - Companies like Facebook contend that it is due to lack of diversity at the lower level of the “tech pipeline”
 - However, the author argues that it is also due to the cultures and practices of both the tech companies, and the people who work in it
 - Garden-variety discrimination, as experienced by people like Kaya Thomas, a black woman in tech (p.21-22).
 - Recruitment process that focuses on students who went to elite colleges like Stanford, Carnegie Mellon, MIT, etc. (which again, skew, white and Asian), and have good connections.
 - Promotion of cultural homogeneity and conformity- “culture fit”.

The Problem: Representation in Tech

- Tech's lack of representation is reflected in its products too
 - Women's smartwatch failure
- Tech relies on ***stereotyping***
 - Placing people into broad labels and targeting products towards them based on their assigned label
- Stereotyping also relies on ***average values*** and products are based on what is considered a "***normal person***"
 - "Normal" : white, male, cisgender, able, young
 - Rest are "***edge cases***"

Philosophical Case for Representation in Tech

Egoism

- **Companies' self-interest.**
- As Fatima's story illustrates, more diversity and better representation would allow *some* companies to make better products.
 - More representation allows companies to know more about their customers, and hence make products better tailored to them
- But, what if striving for representation *harmed* the company's bottom line?
 - The story of **Nextdoor** (p. 68-73).
- Hence, egoism is not enough.

Utilitarianism

- **Commonwealth.**
- Utilitarianism: 😊 -> ⬆️, 😭 -> ⬇️
- Representation also means representation of interests.
 - More representation -> more interests taken into account -> 😊
 - More representation -> more visibility -> more interests taken into account -> 😊
- Representation becomes a matter of **life or death (Nextdoor)**.

Takeaways

- Awareness is the first step
- Diverse teams build better products
- Challenge the “Move Fast and Break Things” mentality
- Systemic change