

HS7.301 Science, Technology and Society

Assignment 4

Based on the following readings, how do you think the design of technology mediates the experience of race?

- a. Stacy Wood, 'Police Body Cameras: Emotional Mediation and the Economies of Visuality', in Sharon Tettegah and Safiya Umajo Noble (eds), *Emotions, Technology and Design* (London: Academic Press, 2016).
- b. Safiya Umoja Noble, 'Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible', *InVisible Culture* 19 (Blind Spots) – Fall, 2013.

Word Limit: 1000-1200 words

Ans:

When various technologies surround us today, it is often believed that technologies are impartial. A motorcycle doesn't discriminate if the rider is black or white, or an air conditioner doesn't act more efficiently in the house of an upper-caste family. However, various social scientists such as Langdon Winner underline how technologies can be apolitical but tend to become political once they enter a society's political diaspora. Technology is a reflection of its creator's ideas. Any bias held by the creator in the design process may lead to unwanted consequences and even can mediate the experience of race in several ways. For example, the widespread fairness creams constantly picture the golden colour as superior to the coloured, or aiming for reduced time complexity rather than accuracy leads to a negative error rate of 12.2% in Indiana while automating the public services system, and the participation of the black community in such schemes from 46.5% to 32.1%. Various impartial technologies are biased in various instances in social settings.

The Police Body Camera initiative proposed using body-worn cameras by police officers to increase transparency and accountability in law enforcement and improve relations between them and the community they serve. The white police officers often discriminated against the black community in the USA and reasoned the extreme police brutality by mentioning the emotional instability of the victims. The initiative devised a solution to record the interaction between the officers and the victims. However, the creators of the technology advertised the product by showcasing themselves as a solution for the police to justify the cases of police brutality rather than to aid the voice of the victims.

Stacy Woods highlights the importance of designing the technology from the perspective of black individuals. Using a body cam as evidence in prosecution paints the black community in a bad light of being at fault every time. Designing the product with the police in a central position highlights the racial differences among various communities in the region. The implementation of body cams invades the citizens' privacy. The cameras could be used to surveil and track citizens, putting them under constant surveillance by the police without any consent. The constant state-sponsored surveillance of the black community would only lead to more tensions between the two social groups, and the relations would worsen. Moreover, the technology may lead to reduced cases of police brutality, but it paints a whole community as a race with an emotional outburst of fear and anger.

Apart from the body cam initiative, various other daily technologies also impact the lives of various races. Facebook admitted that its algorithm favours problematic and offensive content, which can get more online engagement. Promoting such posts makes it easier for people to share bigoted views and connect with like-minded individuals. Twitter trends often showcase explicit keywords against particular communities because of high engagement.

In the article, 'Searching for black girls', Safia Umoja Nobel highlights how technologies reflect that era's creators, social structure, and the position of racial groups and women. Emphasizing the biases and racism in society, she mentions how a google search for the keywords "black women" results in pornographic content that revolves around men's domination and shows black women as inferiors, unlike showing regular content for searching "white women". She demonstrates how Google promotes racial stereotypes by citing search results for 'three black and three white teenagers. Moreover, while searching for education or any occupation related to higher education, such as 'doctor' or 'engineer', the Google search results predominantly showcases images of white people, thereby establishing white supremacy in such field and the existence of a coloured individual in the same comes out as a surprise.

All these search results are guided by various algorithms used for crawling, indexing and ranking. A search engine asks users for input to produce the desired output from billions of websites. Although the ranking

of an uncountable number of websites is automated, the ranking algorithms often depict the biases of the programmers. Ranking web pages requires SEO or Search Engine Optimization, which includes manipulating data in web pages for better rank. And as everyone does not know how to perform SEO, it lies with a specific number of people to perform the task.

Now, if anyone delivering a search result holds any bias, this results in the promotion of biases, stereotypes and discrimination in society. Then, Noble talks about Silicon Valley and its social structure as an excellent example of racism mediating the technologies that mediate the experiences of discriminated races. Now, in Silicon Valley, most of the programmers are white men. Nobel highlights how the participation of African American community is drastically low and limited to the non-technical departments in the given technology despite being exposed to required skills. Moreover, technology excludes women, especially if they are coloured.

Now, just as Langdon Winner argued how technology changes once it enters society's diaspora, it can also be easily noticed how the experiences of various races can drastically change by various aspects of technology. The most common google results about black women show pornographic content while portraying them as a vulnerable community simultaneously, or the Police Body Camera initiative aims to normalize police brutality against the coloured races are an example of how the experiences of different individuals are mediated by technology with the intervention of a creator's biases in a racialized society where a large number of individuals want to follow a regressive old hierarchy to establish their supremacy over others.

#### References:

- a. Stacy Wood, 'Police Body Cameras: Emotional Mediation and the Economies of Visuality', in Sharon Tettegah and Safiya Umajo Noble (eds), *Emotions, Technology and Design* (London: Academic Press, 2016).
- b. Safiya Umoja Noble, 'Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible', *InVisible Culture* 19 (Blind Spots) – Fall, 2013.