Title

Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets

Authors

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Trevor Paglen – Artist and geographer known for investigating mass surveillance and data politics

Year

2019

Format

- Online interactive essay
- Exhibition (Fondazione Prada, Milan; Barbican Centre, London)
- Research + visual critique

Audience

- Designers, Artists
- Technologists
- Researchers in AI, media, ethics
- General public interested in algorithmic justice, facial recognition, or surveillance

Project Description

Excavating AI reveals how large-scale image datasets used to train machine learning systems are not neutral. It critiques the taxonomies, labels, and biases that shape computer vision through datasets like ImageNet, MegaFace, and Microsoft's facial recognition dataset. By visualizing how people are sorted and classified, the project challenges the ethical foundations of AI technologies.

Key Data

Dataset	Images	Purpose
ImageNet	~14 million	Object/image classification

MegaFace	~4 million	Facial recognition training
MS-Celeb-1M	10 million+	Face identification & tagging

Also referenced: WordNet, UTKFace, web-scraped photo datasets, and classification taxonomies.

Bibliography: Writings by the Authors

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