Dissecting the quick fix: Analysing tech-solutionist solutions

2022-03-24

Preliminary note: This is a first write-up of the main idea. To be expanded on and put into adequate form.

Where I'm coming from

Alvin Weinberg, techno-fix evangelist

(Quotes taken from: S. F. Johnston, Techno-fixers, 2020. (https://www.mqup.ca/techno-fixers-products-9780228001324.php))

On eliminating race riots

> I am increasingly impressed with what I call the 'Cheap Technological Fix' as a means of circumventing social problems.
>
> Someone showed me Huntington's correlation between the incidence of hot weather and race riots in India, and this immediately suggested that providing air conditioners … might considerably reduce the probability of race rioting. Admittedly this is a superficial and possibly heartless approach to the problem; yet it has the advantage that it just might work.

On eliminating war

> Before the H-bomb, the problem of war was largely viewed as being insoluble unless we changed "human nature", but by exploiting the crassest notion of self-preservation, the H-bomb offers a quite different "solution" to the problem of war than the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition teaches is possible.
>
> So to speak, to push the theme to its illogical end, one can ask "will technology make social science obsolete?" – i.e. "can a cheap technological fix be developed for every social problem that short-cuts and makes irrelevant the issues of human conflict that underlie the problem as traditionally viewed?

It is easy to be hating that kind of stuff

or, put differently,

Among like-minded people, it is easy to despise tech solutionism.

But there is a problem.

What if those like-minded people, who despise tech solutionism, work in the tech industry themselves – an thus, might do something that does have positive impact?

Here's a dilemma. Now, I was looking for a way to reduce that type of cognitive dissonance.

Can we analyse, "document" a "solution" analogously to how we [should] document models and datasets?

A structured way to analyse "solutions"

For such a structured-analysis approach, what are the *sine qua non*s?

There's at least one:

An analysis may NOT be restricted to the purely technical.

Suggestion: For maximum openness and generality, follow the **W**-questions (plus **how**).

How to *weight* those will depend on the individual "solution", and will require deliberation as well.

In general, to counter-balance established ways of thinking, we'll want to re-distribute focus from the WHAT to the WHO and WHY.

Not just WHAT, but WHO, WHY, and HOW (and WHERE and WHEN and to WHOM)

WHAT

What does the "solution" do?

This is to be understood as comprising the complete technical workflow, starting from what datasets were used, how a model was trained, etc. up to and including how it was evaluated.

WHERE and WHEN and to WHOM

Where, when, and to whom will the "solution" be applied?

This is meant to designate elaboration of the complete (geographical, social, political) context.

WHO

Who developed, implements, has control over the "solution"? Who has access to its data?

A primary type of distinction (though it too has to be seen in context!): *company vs. public institution*

WHY

Why was this solution developed? Complementing the publicly stated motivation, motivations could include

- extracting data (maybe to be employed for other purposes)

- polishing the company's public image (whitewashing)

- ambition

[Very] Contemporary examples

1: Where I'd like to stress the HOW and the WHY: https://www.ukrainetakeshelter.com/ (https://www.ukrainetakeshelter.com/)

Twitter thread (https://twitter.com/chojecka_kasia/status/1501477732533874688) by Kasia Chojecka (excerpt 1)

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9 · · ·

Thank you for your unexpected attention to my latest post about @AviSchiffmann and his (in our opinion) website UkraineTakeShelter which we consider unethical and harmful to refugees that we are currently dealing with (over 1 mn traumatized people entering the country).

💬 29   🔁 968   ♡ 2,190   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9 · · ·

You encouraged me to translate it into English. It is a very sad and very disappointing story about ethics in tech, about thoughtlessness and pride. Please, don't recommend UkraineTakeShelter to the newcomers – it doesn't fulfill the safety standards those people need. Let's go.

💬 6   🔁 148   ♡ 1,013   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9 · · ·

What pisses me off now with the whole process is the cheekiness of Western tech specialists and the lack of humility in organizing effective help. Consider @AviSchiffmann, a Harvard student, who organized an alternative website linking Ukrainians with hosts. A noble idea, but...

💬 7   🔁 73   ♡ 814   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9 · · ·

Together with @ZygmuntowskiJ we asked them to coordinate it with volunteers from PL before the action of creating a new system even begins.

💬 2   🔁 32   ♡ 590   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9 · · ·

We already know from working on the spot that the needs of Ukrainians are more complex than booking an accommodation. It is also transport, medical, financial and psychological support.

💬 2   🔁 53   ♡ 695   ⬆️

Twitter thread (https://twitter.com/chojecka_kasia/status/1501477732533874688) by Kasia Chojecka (excerpt 2)

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9

I'll mention the fact that listings on UkraineTakeShelter look like a joke: a place close to Warsaw is "Riga" and there are many locations from the US. Jesus christ, sometimes those people have only a few hryvnia in their wallets. Who is going to pay for the tickets, you?

💬 5   ⟲ 41   ♡ 614   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9

The second issue is the safety of UA women and their children - unfortunately, people can be cruel and accomodation must be verified on the spot, so that people fleeing the war can find a safe haven. Hence, our volunteers are using the forms and distribute the accommodation.

💬 3   ⟲ 56   ♡ 673   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9

Many people, especially from the West think that "help is help", for which, as a person involved in on-site assistance, I have zero consent. Assistance provided to people fleeing the war MUST be coordinated with the volunteers or the public authorities. Sorry.

💬 5   ⟲ 124   ♡ 1,114   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9

That's why two Americans now going to the TV and boasting about their idea (which most of the Polish aid forces have not heard of at all) is a slap in the face to all those people here (and officials ofc) who are trying to get this shit together.

💬 2   ⟲ 84   ♡ 1,026   ⬆️

Twitter thread (https://twitter.com/chojecka_kasia/status/1501477732533874688) by Kasia Chojecka (excerpt 3)

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9   ···
Such website could be PRICELESS (there are already more than 20 of them though), but only if volunteers from Eastern Europe received clear messages that something like this is being created.

💬 1   🔁 22   ♡ 501   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9   ···
Then the volunteers could help with adapting it to the current needs of #refugees. But it seems that the whole project is just for the sake of these guys' portfolio or a means to getting a funding. I'm so sorry that you decided to use refugees.

💬 1   🔁 69   ♡ 875   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9   ···
You could be really useful with designing tools that would help us with Russian propaganda in Polish, Czech, Slovakian, Lithuanian internet. We are flooded with it.

💬 4   🔁 40   ♡ 601   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9   ···
And that's what I consider to be Silicon Valley or start-up mentality - the feeling of being a SAVIOR, even when you are operating from a safe country and you don't really care about refugees' needs.

💬 2   🔁 205   ♡ 1,356   ⬆️

Kasia Chojecka @chojecka_kasia · Mar 9   ···
The sad thing is that it's not a tech competition, it's war and a very brutal one. And these people are hurt, are helpless and need our support.

💬 2   🔁 36   ♡ 634   ⬆️

First-person (https://twitter.com/AviSchiffmann/status/1498189889614979073) view of the WHY

Avi Schiffmann 🇺🇦
@AviSchiffmann

a cool idea would be to set up a website to match Ukrainian refugees to hosts in neighboring countries

7:54 AM · Feb 28, 2022 · Twitter Web App

82 Retweets   **9** Quote Tweets   **558** Likes

Avi Schiffmann 🇺🇦 @AviSchiffmann · Feb 28
Replying to @AviSchiffmann
this is being created rn, I hope to have it done within 24 hours.

💬 7   🔁 10   ♡ 184

Avi Schiffmann 🇺🇦 @AviSchiffmann · Mar 1
90% finished in 24 hours, goal is to release tomorrow as early as possible.

🇺🇦

💬 5   🔁 11   ♡ 154

NYerinSaigon @NYerinSaigon · Feb 28
Replying to @AviSchiffmann
I think IRC and CRS do this.

💬 1   🔁   ♡ 1

Avi Schiffmann 🇺🇦 @AviSchiffmann · Feb 28
what're those

💬 3   🔁   ♡ 2

2: Where I'd like to stress the WHO and the WHY and the HOW: Google Classroom "Magic (https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/education/adaptive-learning-technology/)"

Blog post (https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/) by Ben Williamson (excerpt 1: business model)

> And it's a controversial business model to apply to education. Dan Krutka, Ryan Smits and Troy Willhelm (https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00609-5) argue that 'Google extracts personal data from students, skirts laws intended to protect them, targets them for profits, obfuscates the company's intent in their Terms of Service, recommends harmful information, and distorts students' knowledge.'

Blog post (https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/) by Ben Williamson (excerpt 2: power)

> Invoking Google magic places out of sight any debate about the social or collective purposes of education, assuming that individualized tuition and efficient knowledge acquisition supported by automation (https://journals.oslomet.no/index.php/seminar/article/download/4268/4078/20334) is the ideal pedagogic mode. It also forecloses the possibility of other forms of information retrieval and discovery, and asserts Google as an authoritative cultural gatekeeper of knowledge.

Blog post (https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/) by Ben Williamson (excerpt 3: privacy)

Google magic distracts attention from the complex privacy policies and user agreements (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1474904116654917) that determine how Google can extract and use the vast troves of user data generated from every click on the interface. It disguises the complex thickets of algorithms that make decisions about individual students, characterizing them simply as innocent and objective ways of delivering 'factuality' to students.