

Ryan Newfell

Artificial Intelligence & Bias

Many of us think of technology as being synonymous with human advancement. The goal of technology and artificial intelligence is to aid humans, to fill in the gaps where our weaknesses reside. Robots and artificial intelligence are being deployed in areas where humans cannot compete, such as calling balls and strikes in a baseball game, measuring Olympic times and race results to the hundredth of a second, and in the fields of precision engineering and quantum computing. For example, “algorithmic trading” on Wall Street “has become so ubiquitous that some estimate well over half of all trading of the S&P 500 Index is done this way” (BBC, 2018). In 2018, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average crashed 800 points in ten minutes, it was blamed on machines. “It’s thought that robot traders were waiting for that yield to hit 3% - a significant figure as it could prompt human investors to switch out of shares into bonds” (BBC, 2018). In reality, analysts don’t know why the robot traders make the decisions they do. This was done by design – artificial intelligence incorporates machine learning to learn on its own. But this can cause havoc and create potential issues beyond our control that we cannot even understand since this machine learning happens in a “black box.” “Our ideas about technology and society that we think are normal are actually ideas that come from a pretty small and homogenous group of people...the problem is that everyone has unconscious biases...and people embed their own biases into technology” (Kantayya, 2020). Artificial intelligence cannot be any “better” than humans when it is learning all its information from us, who are inherently biased. “If we use machine learning models to replicate the world as it is today, we’re not actually going to make social progress” (Kantayya, 2020). In cases where artificial intelligence is deciding who receives a job (or whose application is seen by H.R.), or who is a “trustworthy”

citizen, as is done in China with their “social credit system,” “how do we get justice in a system where we don’t know how the algorithms are working?” (Kantaaya, 2020). There is no black and white answer, “there is no algorithm to define what is just” (Kantayya, 2020). Still, to understand how artificial intelligence inherits bias from humans, we must understand how the media depicts and portrays stereotypes that affect our culture and world views.

Media and Black Stereotypes

Black stereotypes have existed on television for as long as the medium has been around. Early television shows exploited black characters for comedic relief. They were portrayed as secondary citizens, often opportunistic and deceitful, who “may aspire to the American dream of success, but were continually, comically, ill-equipped to achieve it” (Riggs, 1992). “Amos and Andy,” the first prime time television show to feature a black cast, used these depictions often, reinforcing incorrect stereotypes of black American families. “The interests of the black community and the images fed to that black community and the larger American society in the early 1950s were diametrically opposed to each other” (Riggs, 1992).

Nat King Cole was a significant breakthrough in black culture because he did not rely on comedy or laughter as his key to success. King Cole changed the representation of blacks on television. He did not come across as threatening to the majority white audience. However, King Cole had issues finding sponsors for his program, as many advertisers did not want to offend their southern viewers by supporting a program that showed black and white people together. The reality is, television is not a “groundbreaking” medium; it relies on advertisers – “Society moves...and television moves a little behind [it] all the time – it is never going to be leading, it’s always going to follow it – because it’s a sponsored medium” (Riggs, 1992).

With the civil rights movement of the 1960s, liberal producers wanted to do their part and began portraying black characters as intellectuals and in positions of power. However, this created an issue where black characters were essentially “whitewashed.” Diahann Carroll said in 1968, “At the moment, we’re presenting the white Negro. And he has very little Negro-ness” (Riggs, 1992). America was not making any racial progress because they could not accept black culture as it was. “You almost have to over-endow the character with attributes that comfort white, middle-class sensibilities, and strip him or her of anything else so that the sense of the white negro becomes what it takes to make them acceptable” (Riggs, 1992).

“Roots,” whose airing was seen as a defining moment in African-American culture and was one of the first programs to depict the horrors of slavery, still suffered from whitewashing, with the black families achieving the “American Dream” by the end of the program: “Television’s profoundly conservative bias was again underscored, prime time has selectively reframed American history, transforming a national disgrace into an epic triumph of the family and the American Dream” (Riggs, 1992).

Television’s conservative bias can especially be seen in news programs, notably Fox News. Fox News has again and again misreported information about the Black Lives Matter movement, often comparing them to terrorist groups. One of the worst offenders is Bill O’Reilly, who “once equated the Black Lives Matter movement to the Nazi Party, reasoning that they are both ‘extreme group[s]’” (Cherry, 2015). Bill O’Reilly has also falsely claimed that Black Lives Matter wants police officers dead and advocated for police brutality and violence against the public. O’Reilly dismissed violence by police officers against protestors, saying “there is a growing disrespect for police officers in some American neighborhoods” and “that attitude is going to lead to violence” (Cherry, 2015). O’Reilly also heavily insinuated that the death of

Illinois police officer Fox Lake was at the hands of Black Lives Matter (Cherry, 2015). The officer's death was later ruled to be suicide.

This unethical behavior is not limited to O'Reilly, "Megyn Kelly hosted notorious right-wing race-baiters Ron Hosko and Mark Fuhrman to discuss Black Lives Matter, crime, and policing over a dozen times in 2015, and in doing so mainstreamed and legitimized some of the most racist impulses of the right-wing" (Cherry, 2015).

Media and Gay Stereotypes

Stereotypes in the media extend to those in the LGBTQ community as well. In early film and television, homosexuality was rarely shown or discussed, and when it was, it was mocked and ridiculed. "In Hollywood's early years, from the 1890s to the 1930s, homosexuality was often presented as an object of ridicule and laughter. The archetype of 'the sissy' – foppish and feminine males, often of delicate sensibilities – was popular at this time..." ("Queer Representation in Film and Television," 2014).

It wasn't until "Ellen" that a gay character was the main protagonist. "Ellen opened a 'closet door' for fuller integration of gays and lesbians on network television" (Sender, 2006). Will and Grace followed, with Will being a more "straight-laced," non-flamboyant character, and Jack, who was also gay, standing for "some very, very well worn figures in the history of mainstream representation of gay characters" (Sender, 2006). It appeared that gay characters either had to be campy and flamboyantly gay or play a "straight" gay character, known as the minority model. "Under this model, gays and lesbians were seen as being subordinate to the heterosexual majority, with equality and acceptance hinging on their ability to show that they were 'just like everyone else'" ("Queer Representation in the Media," 2014). Gays were barely

allowed to be gay; their sexual identity was used to add a shallow layer of complexity to their characters.

Regarding “Will & Grace,” “They’re not very gay. They’re a kind of vaudeville gay. There is certainly no gay community. There’s no visible sex, at least not any visible gay sex. So it really is in a sense performing acceptance rather than breaking any taboos or pushing the envelope in any important way” (Sender, 2006).

By the 1990s, gay became “cool,” a fad across many television programs. Shows like “The O.C.” depicted two women “trying out” homosexuality, using it as a fad. “The Real World” and “Survivor” incorporated gay characters into every season, making it a genre staple. Premium cable relies on loyal subscribers and not advertisers, like network television, and this allowed for the exploration of more profound and realistic subject matters, including sexuality. “Sex and the City gave us a kind of cautious integration of gay characters and sensibility. Part of its gay sensibility was just in its air and its water. But there were also characters who were friends like Carrie’s friend Stanford” (Sender, 2006). However, gays in “Sex and the City” existed in a heterosexual world; there were still no shows highlighting the gay community.

Shows like “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” finally put the gay community in the spotlight. “‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ welcomed gay men and their consumer expertise into the very heart of the heterosexual family” (Sender, 2006). Since the 2000s, the gay community has seen a more significant presence in media, especially in marketing and advertising. “The role of the gay market is trendsetters, and therefore influencing the rest of the market is very key. So in that way, the marketing to the gay audience is really strategic in terms of the larger sales of the brand” (Sender, 2006). Why is homosexuality finally trendy on television? “The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community is a multi-billion dollar

target audience, estimated to be worth around \$835 billion” (“Pink Dollar Marketing,” 2014). It appears that representation is motivated by money, not by virtue.

Solutions

True equality and fairness would mean that all roles in film and television are available to everyone, regardless and despite of race, gender, or sexual orientation. “After all, like other human beings, queer people can be villains, fools, or rivals...Never having a queer antagonist would be just as poor a decision as the tradition of portraying queer people as only the butt of jokes or as sociopaths” (“Strategies for Engaging,” 2014). Television cannot sanitize our viewing experience for the sake of appealing to the majority’s worldview, which excludes the life experiences of many. Too often, the media tries to depict a “normal” family, which lives somewhere in the “middle,” an attempt not to offend any viewer. When a television producer was asked why he and others ignored the civil rights movement on television in the 1960s, his answer informs us of the real reason for media’s existence: “In those days, our mandate was to amuse an audience – not to excite them – and I stuck to that mandate to try and amuse as many people as I possibly could” (Riggs, 1992). Perhaps our television and media conglomerates should be held to a higher standard than “amusing an audience” when they wield so much power over the thoughts and beliefs of American culture.

Works Cited

BBC. (2018, February 6). *Did robot algorithms trigger market plunge?* BBC News.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-42959755>.

Cherry, T. (2015, December 29). *How Fox News' Primetime Lineup Demonized Black Lives Matter In 2015*. Media Matters for America. <https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/how-fox-news-primetime-lineup-demonized-black-lives-matter-2015>.

Kantayya, Shalini. (2020). *Coded Bias*. Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81328723>.

Pink Dollar Marketing and Queer Representation in Advertising. MediaSmarts. (2014, September 10). <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/queer-representation/pink-dollar-marketing-queer-representation-advertising>.

Queer Representation in Film and Television. MediaSmarts. (2014, September 15). <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/queer-representation/queer-representation-film-television>.

Queer Representation in the Media. MediaSmarts. (2014, August 22). <https://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/queer-representation/queer-representation-media>.

Riggs, M. T., & Riggs, M. T. (1992). *Color Adjustment*. Media Education Foundation (MEF). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JW3yIhB1WwND8w9N72myS_byQYii79Wl/view.

Sender, Katherine E. (2006). *Further Off the Straight & Narrow*. Media Education Foundation (MEF). <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AgLXxPitLHb3qpB079-pUvko029dzgpE/view>.

Strategies for Engaging with Queerness in Media. MediaSmarts. (2019, February 7). <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/queer-representation/strategies-engaging-queerness-media>.