

Heather O'Neill 0:09

Hello, everyone, you are listening to the tech thinking aloud podcast. Each episode we bring tech articles to life by reading them aloud and discussing their importance to the tech community and the world. We're your hosts, Heather and Jim O'Neill.

Today's article is titled The painfully obvious intersectionality of the United States of America, or why this shouldn't be such a chore people. It's written by David Dylan Thomas, and it's featured on media. You can find the link to the article in the show notes below. Here's the article.

I first heard the term intersectionality A few years ago, and had no idea what it meant. When a friend tried to describe it to me, I had a hard time. Eventually though, I began to understand it as a different way of looking at identity

We tend to be very binary when we look at identity, things that are one thing or the opposite. We don't have much room for stuff that can be two things. This makes sense. Or at least it's easier for our minds to deal with things that are one thing we like to categorize. It's a bias. It makes thinking about things easier. Complexity hurts, complexity costs. complexity is time consuming, and we are busy, busy people. The problem with being basic when it comes to identity, though, is that it doesn't map well to reality. Not only can stuff be two things, stuff invariably is two things, or four things or 100 things all at the same time, and on a sliding scale. And when we force people to be one thing, we shut out all sorts of other parts of their identity and experience. This is what intersectionality hopes to avoid by giving us a more functional nuanced way of thinking about it at thing is, complexity isn't that hard when we already have a framework for it, navigating the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for example, requires holding hundreds of different relationships and dozens of story arcs in your mind at the same time. And many people do it without even thinking about it, and in fact, enjoy the complexity of it. But there's another even more common metaphor for intersectionality that a lot of people should be perfectly comfortable with. And it's the United States of America. It's right there in the name United States, many, many, many different identities 50, to be exact, with their own rules and ways of doing things, but all line to one identity with its own overarching set of rules. And it is true intersectionality and that it isn't one thing for a while and then switches to another, but it is all 50 states at the same time. America is not Alaska for a while, and then New York and then Texas does all three and more at the same fucking time. Think about that. It's absurd. How can you be Alaska and York and Texas at the same time? It makes no sense. These things are completely different. Hell, different parts of those states are different from each other. But somehow, conceptually, we're okay with it.

Now, how can someone be black and gay and Muslim all at the same time, and rural and a Harry Potter fan and lower middle class and dyslexic impossible. Our minds can only deal with thinking about the stereotypes that go along with any one of those identities at the same time. Except No, we are perfectly

capable of simultaneously understanding all of those identities as one identity. I submit that any one of us should be able to handle at least 50 different identities for any one person, including ourselves.

And America isn't just a little intersectional. It's a lot. I was at a conference with a group of friends, one of whom was in America for the first time, and had planned out a handful of states to visit, which brought up some of the following questions. If you wanted someone to get a sense of America, but they could only visit three states, where would you send them? It's incredibly hard for you just isn't enough, how 10 barely scratches that. Even from a climate perspective, there are so many different possible experiences. Although to be fair, Alaska and Hawaii are responsible for half of that ship. We contain multitudes. And America is uniquely suited to cater to the idea of intersectionality. It's just that it chooses not to for the most part, but even the government is this weird, simultaneous existence of executive, legislative and judicial identities, some of whom are elected by one of the most intersectional groups of identities ever assembled. We get to actually kick ass at enabling and celebrating and our sectionality, if we just read the damn manual once in a while.

Which is not to say that we're always happy about our intersectionality quite the contrary, but we do understand it. Texas may not be very happy that New York is not Texas, but it's still America. But at least it understands conceptually that New York is another identity that America contains. They don't literally think it's a different country. Okay, maybe some of the time. And here's the thing, we're only going to get more intersectional. Generation Z is by far the most diverse group of young ladies we've managed to produce yet, and perhaps not coincidentally, on track to become the largest on the planet. The future is intersectional.

So the next time and American you know, is having trouble with the whole concept of intersectionality just remind them that they are a citizen of an intersectional. Country, a country founded on and that values, at least conceptually, the idea of intersectionality otherwise, we would have just made it one damn state.

That article was written by David Dylan Thomas, a content strategist and movie buff. Their website is daviddylanthomas.com. And they're available to talk on twitter at [movie underscore London](https://twitter.com/movieunderscore). Thank you.

Hey, everyone. Welcome to tech thinking aloud. And thanks for listening to that article. We're very excited today to be here with David Dylan Thomas, who wrote the article that you just heard. David, thanks for joining us today. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself your background and what led you to write the article?

David Dylan Thomas 6:40

Sure, and thanks for for having me on. So I am the principal content strategy at Think Company. It's an experience design firm. And I also have a podcast about cognitive bias. So I spent a lot of time thinking about the intersection of tech and bias. This particular article, I wish I had a better story but what happens is I'll get ideas for, you know, stories or articles. And I'll very quickly go to my medium account, you know, click on new story, write a title and a brief synopsis. And then like, move on, because I really have time to write the article just then. So I've got like 50 unpublished, like ideas, right? I use my medium is my idea log. And for whatever that is kind of ask them actually, let's it's the only way I can keep track. Right. So So I went back, you know, I guess in the spring, and every now and then when I do have time, I kind of like, browse through the titles, and I'll see one that catch me I'm like, Oh, yeah, I want to write about that. And it probably won't take too long. So I can't tell you why that particular one sparked my eye when it did. But it was one of those moments of like, Oh, yeah, the US is kind of intersectional like at its core. I someone read an article about that. And then I, you know, made the little note in medium and then eventually came back to it.

Heather O'Neill 7:51

I really love that. I might have to try that because what I do to keep track of all my ideas is I write them on sticky notes and I stick them on, like a bulletin board behind my computer, and then if they don't fall off, eventually I write them. So... not always the best method, but it works for now, I guess so, really loved the concept of United States as being intersectional. But one thing that stood out to me or that I want to clarify, is what intersectionality actually is because you don't define it fully in your article. And it's actually comes from Kimberly Crenshaw, who coined the term back in 1989, to talk about the intersections of oppression and structures of power, specifically from a black woman's experience being both different from being a black man and a white woman, which, you know, is me and you. So the idea of when we use the analogy, United States, there's maybe two levels to think about. The first being that sometimes people can sort of be both Pennsylvania and American, right, that those multiple identities can coexist and overlap.

But then maybe the level underneath that is closer to what Kimberly Crenshaw was getting at, which is, people from Philly versus Pittsburgh, or Pittsburgh versus Omaha, are going to have different life experiences because of the way the power structures of those different state, local and federal governments intersect in their lives. So I guess my question to you is sort of like, does that fit with the analogy you were going for? Or does that sort of steamroller into something entirely different?

David Dylan Thomas 9:28

Well, I think it's the next logical step, right? Because it's one thing to say that America in and of itself is, you know, coexisting multiply and cohabitating many multiple identities at the same time. So you know, it gives you a frame of reference to think about an individual as not just being black or not just being white, but being black and female and, you know, Native American and like just having having these multiple things at the same time. The next step, I think, with that as well, okay, well, then, you know,

what does that matter and it matters, you know very much when you're thinking about power and how power treats those identities.

And how that can be multiplicative, or you know, sometimes invisible, right. So, you know, the state is going to treat a black woman differently than a white man or than a, you know, a black man, right? I mean, one of my favorite examples is, you know, you think back to the civil rights movement, and you know, you'd have these sittings, and like, the women would be set to get coffee. Like, it's like, wait a minute, wait, what are we fighting for? You know. But, you know, that was a room full of black people, but some of them were men, and some of them are women. And even the black people had power structures, you know, within that group that defined what a woman was expected to do. So I think that's a very like, it makes. I didn't know that history. When I wrote the article. I was just trying to get my head around the basic concept, but that history, I think it makes perfect sense that that's where the history would originate because you don't notice those intersectionalities less the powers that be start to try to use them to, you know, manipulate you or have you in, huh,

Heather O'Neill 10:56

yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I think

It sort of leads me to this follow up of like, what do people miss about the concept? If they see intersectionality is talking about identity, but don't include the realities of systemic oppression?

David Dylan Thomas 11:11

Yeah, I think that that that's a really good question, because I think that, you know, the first step, the first thing intersexuality is kind of trying to get you to understand is that is that notion of multiple multiple identities, like all coexisting at one time, but there's the then the kind of so what moment or the Okay, does that mean? I need to like treat you differently. People tend to be very self centered. When they think about these things. It's like, Oh, this is is this simply another version of PC? Right? Is this simply another way to police how I'm supposed to behave towards you? I think the next logical unnecessary step is to then let that become an understanding of like the systemic oppression. And that's way harder to see. Like, it's hard enough. You know what, we'll probably talk about bias a little later, but it's hard enough for me to look at you and understand you as a multi dimensional being right, like, you know, I see a white woman and all the stereotypes that go with that and

Unknown Speaker 12:00

Like, that's easy, right? It doesn't take a lot of effort for me to do that. The same way, it's really easy for me to look at your life and say, Well, your life must, obviously be the result of your choices. Right? That's a way easier story for me to handle, then Oh, your life is the result of your outcomes of the result of

many, many different systems that are all working out at the same time that have a stored precedence, right? That's a lot for me to handle. It's easier for me to just say, oh, you're an individual, and you make your own choices and your outcomes are your own DNA. Like why do I have to think about intersectionality? And even if you do get me to think about that all Why should I bother than thinking about systems of oppression? That's way more than I signed on for you don't I mean?

Heather O'Neill 12:37

Yeah, absolutely. But I think it's so important because, like, I look at my life and and you know, as I've grown as a person, and as I've learned about intersectionality, and systems of oppression and being white, I see a lot of ways in which, you know, being white has really benefited me, even though I'm a woman and I also faced oppression on that front and even though whatever you No other histories and experiences I have and the choices I make. There's a level of system that works in my favor without me having to do too much. And you know, the more I spend time digging into it, the more I can see that happen, but it is a lot of work. And it's hard. You can't just start there, right? This is years in the making, for me to understand that at least some of it.

Unknown Speaker 13:21

Yeah, there's a there's a great exercise philosophical exercise called the veil of ignorance. And it goes back centuries, but the basic idea is, you know, the, the perfect society is one in which you'd be willing to enter into not knowing who you'd be in that society, right. And I think there's a nice Nexus there of intersectionality and systems of oppression, because, you know, let's say I entered that society. I don't know if I'm going to be a transgendered prisoner. Right? Like I can play right now, that is not you know, this particular society at this moment in history is not what I would like to enter like, you know, I would, I would, I would walk in with some pretty knowing some pretty I'd be treated very, very, very poorly, right? So if on the other hand, you know, the perfect society would be one where the systems of oppression that exist no matter who no matter what intersectionality space you occupy is only ever going to get so bad. Right. And that's sort of like how we that's a great, I think that's a great rubric for how we're defining is your society woke is their society, beneficial? Is their society giving, you know, is it compassionate? You know, can I can I come up with any, you know, roll the dice, or I guess, multiple roles of multiple times to come up with an identity and still come out, you know, in a good place?

Heather O'Neill 14:37

Yeah, and I think that's what a lot of people miss when we talk about these overnight successes or, you know, oh, you can do it too, is that it's not just about hard work, right? You can only work so hard and it won't matter. You know, I see a lot of tweets about things like, if you if hard work was enough, then every person with four jobs would be a millionaire and it's really so much about Other things that are not hard work, and it's not to say nobody works hard, but there's so much more at play.

Unknown Speaker 15:06

Yeah. And I think that I just literally finished reading an article earlier this afternoon that a psychologist Nancy Peter Peters Mary turned me on to. It's basically about how she created a mathematical model called the Athene afib model for trying to model inequality like coming up with a mathematical model for inequality, and they do all the formulas. And, you know, the best model is one that basically describes a system where like, all things being equal, right? Eventually, no matter what, no matter how you distribute the wealth initially, eventually, everybody like, everybody's money flows into the hands of a very few people, like an unbounded, unbounded, free market, you know, mathematically, right? If you just do the math and play it out over a long enough time, will result in ridiculous inequality, right. And it's really the luck of like to bring it back to luck. It's really the luck of the draw. So no matter how hard or the majority were That's irrelevant has nothing to do with the ultimate outcome. The ultimate outcome is who got the advantage first and who got who got a head start. And then think about, it's like the game monopoly. Like, if you get a head start and you haven't landed all the key spaces, you're eventually going to win. It's just a mathematical certainty. It has nothing to do with hard work and happen. It has much, much more to do with, did you come out ahead when you started?

Heather O'Neill 16:23

Which is funny, because when the game monopoly was invented, you'll find I know a lot of random trivia, but they actually invented it to show people why monopolies were bad. And so it was supposed to be this intentionally like, horrible game. And it's like one of the most popular games and it completely missed the mark in terms of actually demonstrating that.

Unknown Speaker 16:44

Well, the the story I heard because I love the story. The story was originally created by a woman. And there were two rounds that first round you play sort of like the original monopoly and it is this horrible monopolistic like look how terrible and nobody enjoys it, right? You're sitting there in this death row.

David Dylan Thomas 17:00

24 hours to get all the all the points. But then there's a second round where you basically play it as a socialist. Like, they're all these new rules that get introduced about how property is distributed, and you actually have to pay taxes and you like it's a completely different game and like, way more enjoyable. And then some dude bought the game ripped out the second half, and then just sold it as monopoly. That seems accurate. Unfortunately, I don't know that part of that. I did know that it was initially built to be a commentary on why monopolies are bad. Oh, yeah, I want that socialist version. I know. I feel like someone wants to recreate it at somewhere.

Jim O'Neill 17:35

I knew there was a reason somewhere why I like I prefer games that, you know, like, every turn, everybody gets stuff as opposed to one person getting stuff on their turn.

David Dylan Thomas 17:44

Yeah. Yeah, there's a whole class now of cooperative games like pandemic where it's not about defeating each other. It's about nonzero sum. It's like we all need to band together to stop something happening.

Jim O'Neill 17:54

I actually would love to go back to that. That so what moment David that you mentioned or

Earlier, because one of the reasons that we love this article and wanted to talk to you about it was to sort of unpack intersectionality further, in terms of not just how to understand it, but how to, you know, apply that understanding in your daily life. So, you know, we're a tech thinking aloud, and we and our listeners scripts in this tech and engineering product and design space. And so I was wondering, in that context, you know, maybe talking about your work or outside of work, if you prefer, where do you think your understanding of intersectionality kind of has the most impact, you know, day to day and what would you advise other people to consider about that?

David Dylan Thomas 18:39

I mean, I think the the impact I think it has just on my thinking is to help me abandon simplicity or over simplifying things. So it makes it easier for me to realize it's a really bad idea to stereotype, right or to try to simplify a person down to what is immediately apparent about them.

And it gets me to think more deeply about the multiplicity of their personality, right? In my work, it makes me deeply suspicious of sort of demographic based personas. Right? Like so where I work we are, you know, pre diehard, like jobs to be done kind of methodology, folks. So when we when we like to think about persona, we don't like to think about your, you know, Japanese man from New Zealand, who's 30 years old and likes to drive race cars, like, No, I just want to know what you're trying to accomplish by using this product. And if you're trying to accomplish the same thing, as a six year old girl from Kansas, great, you're now in the same group, like, like that, to me is a more useful way of thinking about things than trying to like unpack your identity in the context of this thing. Like, I think that's really where the power structure thing becomes helpful. Because then you're thinking about I'm creating a product and putting something in the world. I need to think about the power structures, right and the people who are affected by those power structures and does this make that worse or better? I think that's a very useful context for the you know, power structure. Part of

intersectionality but like, when dealing with individuals, it just is a way of reminding myself that this individual is not like a unit. Right? It's not sort of all made out of the same elements. They are in fact, this, you know, it's like it's like those those planets and Star Wars movies that have exactly one, you know, topographical feature. Like they're the ice world or the swamp world. Like there's no planet, you know, in Star Wars that has lots of different biomes for some reason, like, that's the way we go around thinking about people's that their health or their day. Gobots like, no, they're like, earth, or even just, you know, a 60 mile radius of your own town, which probably has lots of different, you know, geographies. It's Yeah,

Heather O'Neill 20:39

Yeah. And that's a great analogy a appreciate your Star Wars reference a lot more of a Star Trek than a Star Wars fan. Sure. I do like Star Wars quite a bit. And I agree. They're always the planets and they're always uniformly the same, except for like this one spot where people have found to habitate

David Dylan Thomas 20:56

Yeah.

Heather O'Neill 20:57

So building off of Jim's question a little bit. I'd love to know more about, you know, I'm also very against the demographic personas because I don't think they're helpful. I do think they sort of involve stereotypes. But when we think about intersectionality, and we're designing, and I think this will get a bit into a lot of the bias work that you do, but I guess what I'm wondering is, like, how do you know if you're doing it right? Or how do you how do you check yourself on when you might be stereotyping? Do you have any tips or tricks that you think about for helping people see the power structures more quickly, or recognize that they've jumped into a stereotype that they didn't mean to is sort of reductive?

David Dylan Thomas 21:40

I'm always a big fan of just bringing other voices in, right like I am, you know, having studied bias for a very long time. One of the things that keeps coming back is knowing about the bias doesn't prevent you from committing the bias. So you're sort of like, just own that. You've got it. You can work on it, but just a

Unknown Speaker 22:00

That you have this knee jerk reaction to things and knee jerk way of seeing the world. But the good news is the person across from you has a different knee jerk reaction of seeing way of seeing the world. And then this other person like Sue, the more the more different lived experiences you can bring to a

question, the more deeply you can think about that question, right? The more fleshed out that design will be so a big fan of things like the idea of Red Team Blue team, which is to say, have a blue team who's going to be your you know, rather than all design team, they're going to do the research, they're going to sort of build the the idea of the products maybe even get as far as a wireframe or some just way to conceptualize it. But before you really commit, you know, struggle resources to are you stuck building a prototype or anything, you have a red team who comes in for one day, and the red team's job is to go to war with the blue team and pick up pick it apart and have that extra perspective that the blue team doesn't have because they're so in love with their their idea and they're kind of locked into a confirmation bias. The red team can come in fresh and be like, Well wait, did you think about this or do you think about you know, this one will population or do you think about this unintended consequences, blah, blah, blah. So I'm a big fan of that approach. And whether that's literally getting a red team in or just literally bringing someone in who has zero contacts and say, hey, look at this, this looks right to you, you know, just getting that outside perspective. The other method I'm really a big fan of is called speculative design, which is where it's basically like black mirror. You just take an idea. And then you tell a story about it going horribly wrong. Right? You tell a story about what would happen if you put it in the hands of real human beings with all their weaknesses, and all their you know, or the real world develops power structures, right? Like, I think I tweeted once that anybody who's working on a new technology, by law should be required to write a black mirror episode about that technology.

Heather O'Neill 23:43

I think that's a really interesting and a really smart way to do it. A lot of the things we do with our clients is stress test this and so we say, you know, okay, it's sort of like what you were saying, although we've never called it speculative design, as we say, you know, how can I use this in the worst way possible, how can I make this go horribly, horribly wrong? And who gets hurt by that? Yeah. And how do we prevent that from happening? How do we prevent bad players from having power to cause that kind of harm?

Unknown Speaker 24:12

Exactly. And like even that veil of ignorance thing I was talking about before, like you can apply it to products and say, okay, you know, this product will be perfect when, no matter who I am, I'm okay with this being in the world, right. Mike Montero talks a lot about how if you would take an Uber through the veil of ignorance, you would have designed it very differently because Uber, you know, do you want to be a woman in a world where Uber Uber exists the way it does? Do you want to be a cab driver in a world where Uber just the way it is, you want to be Uber driver even in the world, in a world? Yeah, right. Like pick all those different roles and see if you can find where it was, whoo, it's not so great to be this person if this product exists.

Heather O'Neill 24:47

Well, even the latest stuff that so I never have jumped on the bandwagon and I'm very glad that I didn't. But they they've been working on self driving cars, and the designers are the program was literally programmed it to hit people not in the crosswalk because it didn't ever tell them not to. And it did it hit someone going like 30 miles an hour and she flew across the road. It was a big news story a couple weeks ago. And nobody on the team saw she not all people walking crosswalks maybe we shouldn't make sure that it's always avoiding obstacles they thought only in crosswalks, or only at intersections, I guess. But it's wild to me that that got tested in the real world and actually physically caused harm. like

Unknown Speaker 25:34

yeah, I mean, that's the thing that's that's the stakes, were starting to realize we're playing with threat like in the early days of Agile in the sort of move fast and break things thing. Like the the notion at its core was pretty simple, right? It's like, you know, try stuff out as quickly as possible to see what's wrong with it. That's actually a very, very old idea. It's part of one of the foundational aspects of Japanese car waking was, you know, catch errors early. Before They get out into the world, but we kind of like reified that a bit and how we don't think about move fast and break things, as you know, move fast and break insignificant things that aren't going to kill anyone. We just think of it as just move fast to break things. Like we kind of forgot the context of that statements, and

Heather O'Neill 26:15

breaking things that are bad.

Jim O'Neill 26:16

Yeah, exactly. You can sort of imagine one of the Uber folks on that team, you know, saying basically, Well, technically, the problem of recognizing obstacles outside of a crosswalk is too hard. So we're going to move that to v2. And that's acceptable.

Unknown Speaker 26:33

Yeah, there's so much we could do a whole other episode or two or three on like AI. Moral hazard of gameplay like

Heather O'Neill 26:41

oh, I have feelings there.

Unknown Speaker 26:42

There's there's so many I'll just say one story because I literally just wrote about this yesterday. There was a an AI that was supposed to sort of like mimic evolution and like artificial life and so you have all these little tiny bots with all these little rules and the idea of the system is be as energy efficient as possible and they gave the bots these rules around. These are things that use energy. And these are things that give you energy. So like, eating gives you energy, right? But mating uses up energy. And then they realized that a lot of these bots were just sort of doing all this meeting and they were wondering wonder why and like, they're having all these kids like, okay, they're having these kids and then they would eat the kids. And they're like, what is happening and they realized, they find giving birth as requiring zero energy. So of course, the clever little AI is realized, Oh, we just need to have lots of kids because they don't require energy to create and then we we have a free food source and the cherry on top here and they even the the guy who was presenting this work even said it in his speech. You know, we when we were designing this didn't think of having kids as requiring energy. And we're all a bunch of dudes and I will call we have a male bias here like exactly like, surprising no one there was not a single woman on this team who I think I'm going to go on a limb here and would have been more likely to point out Oh, yeah, having kids requires a lot of energy.

Heather O'Neill 28:05

Yeah, it was 34 hours. So back to me on that energy consumption thing.

Unknown Speaker 28:11

Oh my god. But that's but that's, you know, and that's just artificial life. But that's that happens all the time.

Heather O'Neill 28:17

Yeah, no, it does. And actually, I know You talk a lot about bias. But I have a talk that I've given a few times called overcoming bias and design. And the answer is basically you can't so you have to get other people involved and preferably people not like you. Yeah. And preferably treat them like experts because you don't know shit. But one of the things when I was researching for the article, is about how algorithms work and how there's so much bias baked into them, and I'm not sure if you're familiar with Kathy O'Neill. She wrote a book called weapons of mass destruction. I have been meaning to read this but uh, it's fabulous. So I studied math in college. So big math nerd to begin with. And yeah, she she talks About how algorithms are bias because if you start with people building rules, because algorithms are just rules, people are biased. So their rules are going to be biased based on what they think is important or what they see as a priority. And then on top of that, when you put data in, that is also biased because we live in a bias society, your output is going to be biased unless you tell the system how to account for the bias in the data. And the example that she talks about is how I think it's in New York, but I forget which state is using sentencing algorithm to make their sentencing more fair. And what actually happened is now their sentencing is more unfair, because it looks at past sentencing. And it looks at all the data of how people are criminalized. And as I'm sure you're aware, you know, people of

color and especially black people are criminalized much more heavy than white people in our society and So this algorithm is continuing to perpetuate that. But it's the algorithm so people think it's fair. And that's one of the things that I spent a lot of time trying to explain to people is like no, algorithms can be biased. numbers can lie. Because if if they couldn't, then you could always tell me what a six means. But you can't because you need context. Yeah, to know. And so that means that numbers aren't just unbiased things you can reference and have them be good. You can manipulate them in so many ways to make them say what you want. And they have all the biases of the people who made them, who found them, who studied them, and the society that we live in. Yeah, and there's this myth around the idea that if you, if you point an AI at the world and say, go learn, it is going to somehow come up with an unbiased view of the world because after all, it's a machine. And with that, sort of neglect is the idea that you know, you've heard the phrase garbage and garbage out. Yeah. Well, I like to say the past in the past out, like, if you point the world if you point the AI at a race, racist, sexist world, it is going to spit out a racist, sexist future. Like, because you can't possibly do it.

Unknown Speaker 31:12

Yeah, it's not interpreting that it's not thinking about intersectionality it's not thinking about systems of power, it's just looking at the outcomes of the systems of power right? When you can get an AI that actually understands context which God help us that's that's when you get to like, Skynet but but once it's able to understand that level of complexity understand like show me the actually understand systems of oppression, right, then I'll show you like an AI that's going to give you like the world you want. I'm a big I'm a big fan of saying that we should be lying to AI. We should be showing AI the world's we want and start saying like, you know, here's a bunch of instead of showing you the whole world, I'm just going to show you a bunch of black female scientists so that you record in your computer brain that black female equals scientists and scientists equals black female Right, because if I just put you at the world we've got that systemically makes that makes that less likely. Then you're just going to say, Oh, that's the way it is. That's the way it should be.

Heather O'Neill 32:10

Exactly. And even the Google auto responder thing where it was having language processing and auto completing words and sentences, and they they quizzed it with like analogies, and it was, you know, man is too and then it filled in computer programmer. And then as woman is too and it filled in homemaker. Yeah. And it's like, yeah, who didn't see that coming? Oh, I love you. Hey,

Unknown Speaker 32:39

let's talk my favorite little like, again, cherry on top. I already cherry on top of all that is that there was recently an article about the language processing

David Dylan Thomas 32:48

algorithms. And, like many of them, just as an inside joke are named after Sesame Street characters, but all the ones they mentioned, at least for me and after male Sesame Street characters, like there's a

Happy.

Heather O'Neill 33:01

Color Me unsurprised. We. So I have a five year old daughter. And you know, we'll read stories with her. And ever since she was little, I've just changed the gender of everybody in the book to she no matter what, because she couldn't read. So she didn't know the difference. And now that she's learning to read, she's correcting me. And I'm like, No, because I don't want everybody in your book to be boys because there's like, one character at most in any given book. That's not a boy. And it's really, really frustrating. And we've gone out of our way to find better literature for her. But she comes home with books from the library at school and all this other stuff and people get her presence and it's like, nobody thought that maybe we shouldn't have for these penguins be a boy and one girl with eyelashes and a pink bow. It's like sending so much message to her. When she came home and said, the girl has eyelashes I'm like, Look at daddy, you know he has eyelashes too. And so it's it's so hard to counteract that and it starts

So Young and we don't even think about it. I mean...

Jim O'Neill 34:03

She's learning exactly the same way that the algorithms are learning.

David Dylan Thomas 34:06

That's actually a really good point, right? Like, just looking at the world as it is like, and accepting it. Right. Like that's, that's, that's how that's what computers do I know better. Yeah. And that and so and syncing with ai ai is your children. They don't know better. Yeah, right. No five year olds as a deep understanding of the systems of oppression, you know, nor nor would they, so we have to actively work and it's, it feels like such an uphill battle. And so if you're not doing that with your AI, you're never going to overcome the bias. You're just going to reinforce it.

Unknown Speaker 34:38

I mean, that's something we've tried to actively do with Karen, that 11 year old named Karen and at some point, we realized he had asked us a question about famous female scientists and between me and my wife, who was in fact a female scientist, she's a pediatric neuropsychologist. We only came up with like three. And we're like, Okay, this is a problem. So we bought, like the big book of female

scientists and like, one, one story and not One female scientist night we that would be his bedtime reading. So we would again set up that pattern, female equals scientist, scientist equals female. Because that's where it all comes from. It's just pattern recognition. And if we grow up with like the wrong patterns, then it'll be really hard to dig them out later.

Heather O'Neill 35:16

Yeah, absolutely. It feels like so much pressure to to like, combat all of society go. So, David, thank you so much for being such a wonderful guest today. Before we go, I'd love to hear what projects you're working on these days that you'd like to shout out or send people to.

Unknown Speaker 35:36

So I am in the middle of working on a book, it's going to come up next year. And to sort of just at this point, there's nothing to point you to accept my Twitter feed which is at movie underscore, pundits. p amp D it I'll be updating all of the updates will be going out through my Twitter. So once there is a site to go to and all that good stuff. It'll be there. So if you start following me now, when it comes out, you'll you'll see all the details, but Basically, I think it'll, it'll basically, it's basically about bias inform design a lot of the things we've been talking about how to catch bias in the designs you're creating, how to know about the biases of your users, and how to basically keep your own biases from hurting users. So it's a lot of that stuff.

Heather O'Neill 36:16

And that's really crucial. And I'm really looking forward to getting your book when it comes out. Thank you. Again, thank you so much for being here today. Thank you so much. We really appreciate it.

David Dylan Thomas 36:26

My pleasure.

Heather O'Neill 36:30

A big thanks to this week's author for sharing the article. And thank you also to our producer Melanie Scroggins. To get details about anything we referenced in this episode, or to recommend an article for a future episode, visit [tech thinking aloud.com](http://techthinkingaloud.com) we'll see you in the next episode.