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HOW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IMPACTS BIPOC CREATORS

ALGORITHMS, DEMONETIZATION, AND THE CREATOR
TAKE CREATIVE CONTROL

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THE CREATOR AND AI

Nick Huff Barili was born in Argentina and immigrated to Oakland, CA at a young age. Arriving in a new town and a new country, the culture shock was immediate. He didn't speak English and was thrust into a new environment with kids from all different backgrounds. But like many young kids, he adapted. He fell in love with the culture and with the underground hip-hop scene, blaring Living Legends as he went about town. He learned very quickly the unifying power that hip-hop had on people, despite where they came from. He saw these independent artists hustling to make it big, refusing to be held back by the usual gatekeepers in the music industry, and that approach in the music industry really inspired him to think bigger and bolder.

At the age of 18, he had an apprenticeship at a local radio station, KPFA, which opened his eyes to the parallels between hip-hop and activism. This experience gave him the idea for "Hard Knock TV," a show to showcase in-depth conversations about news, culture and hip-hop. However, when he began to shop the idea around, no one bit. So with nowhere to go, he turned to YouTube. At the time, YouTube was dominated by cat videos and "epic fails".

Nevertheless, Nick found himself a niche, putting out content that was innovative, fresh and meaningful. With interviews with Kendrick Lamar (before "good kid, m.A.A.d. city") and J Cole, his viewership only grew, along with his ability to earn money from views.



SOURCE: AMIL CHARLEMAGNE

Then Nick interviewed rapper LeCrae, who at the time was speaking out on race in America, Colin Kaepernick, and harmful stereotypes. The video was instantly flagged for "demonetization" by YouTube, along with 70 other videos of his, due to a change in their advertising policies. These "flags" are powered by algorithms (a.k.a. Artificial Intelligence) that automatically search for keywords that could be controversial, provocative, or even harmful in some cases.



SOURCE: HARDKNOCKTV

The issue arises, however, when the computer cannot tell the difference between incitement or discussion. And because Nick's conversations often take on controversial topics (racism, stereotypes, white supremacy and the like) that make corporations uncomfortable, the flags are often used as a one-size-fits-all protection against lawsuits.

The flag in this case meant that Nick was no longer able to make money from these views, essentially censoring Nick for focusing on these important topics. The challenge for Nick and many other digital creators is that they now have to walk this capitalist tightrope, which inevitably tilts in the direction of the corporation, deciding between original and provocative content that continues to push these uncomfortable conversations about race and inequality or producing "ad-friendly" content that is devoid of context and substance. Artificial Intelligence (AI), is still a product of humans, which means it has blindspots. As Kate Crawford, an expert in the field, wrote "Like all technologies before it, artificial intelligence will reflect the values of its creators."

And as is often the case, the creators and computer scientists at the largest social media platforms are overwhelmingly white and mostly male. What has occurred as a result are social media platforms that are inherently biased. Biased against race and biased against gender.

REWIND: WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN SAY AI?

The term “artificial intelligence” or “AI” can conjure up scary images of robots taking over—we all remember HAL—but in its simplest form, AI merely refers to a field of science that seeks to create systems that act more like humans. Alan Turing, often referred to as the “father of computer science” asked a very simple question in the 1950s, “Can machines think?”

What came next were a slew of tests, studies, and experiments to better understand how we can use machines in our everyday lives. AI, as we know it today, typically refers to the practice of leveraging “computers and machines to mimic problem-solving and decision-making capabilities of the human mind.” And in a society that is obsessed with social media, not to mention the ongoing pandemic that has forced many of us to use more online services, AI inevitably takes center stage.

AI often takes the form of one or more algorithms (another one of those daunting words), which are mathematical formulas that predict what we might like, do, or buy based on lots of data.

AI AND SOCIAL MEDIA

When it comes to social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), AI is critical to the profitability and sustainability of both the creator and the company. These algorithms can determine how many views a YouTube video will get, how many clicks a Facebook post will get, or how many followers a TikTok star will garner. The more views, likes, and clicks, the more money the creator will make. And for many digital creators, this is their sole income. And for many digital creators, this is their sole income.

However, in addition to views, ad revenue plays a crucial role in the life of the digital creator.

Over the years, however, social media companies have shifted their focus from consumers to advertisers. This departure can add undue pressure to digital creators and social media stars or “influencers” to focus more on paid advertisement or content that drives ads, rather than focusing on making content that is authentic and substantive. This shift has made social media marketing a multi-billion dollar industry.

According to the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI (HAI), there are currently 3.78 billion social media users worldwide who consume, on average, over two hours of social media day. And almost half of these consumers rely on influencer recommendations. Forbes reports that more than half of consumers recommend products and services based on their online customer experience. So more views, leads to more ad revenue, which empowers digital creators to expand their reach and monetize their work, but at what cost?

THE "ADPOCALYPSE"

Ironically, the policy change in question was YouTube’s response to advertisers not liking their ads being linked to channels that promoted or tolerated anti-semitic comments or white-supremacists. This led to a number of large companies pulling their ads from YouTube, hence the portmanteau. YouTube’s knee-jerk response was to create a policy that would appease advertisers at the expense of content creators. The new policy and new algorithm would now flag content that was deemed “Not Advertiser-Friendly” and included topics that were seen as “sensitive social issues” or “tragedy and conflict.” However, the algorithm does not understand context, no matter how hard its coders try.

This policy essentially creates a dangerous chilling effect, incentivizing creators to not discuss important issues, like race, sex, discrimination, and mental health.

YouTube is definitely not the only social media giant attempting to use broad-sweeping policies to rid controversial topics. Instagram has made it difficult for users to see content that its algorithm labeled inappropriate. They implemented a Sensitive Content Control filter in the app which automatically limits “upsetting or offensive content.” This policy essentially primes users in a way that can hinder open dialogue and unique perspectives. In the wake of these changes, we heard from countless small businesses that their ads were being blocked and content being suppressed - a dire consequence to their online marketing strategy.

Policies like these are particularly concerning for BIPOC creators because these policies have been repeatedly found to affect them at a disproportionate rate. Instagram has acknowledged that algorithmic racial bias was found on their app. YouTube creators have sued the company, alleging that YouTube representatives have admitted that their algorithms categorize creators based on race and other distinguishing characteristics. While the actual data is hard to come by, due to proprietary algorithms, the stories of BIPOC creators being flagged continue to pile up.

Here are just a few:

- [Ziggi Tyler](#), a popular TikTok influencer, reported being flagged for “inappropriate content” because he used the term “Black” in this bio. As a test, he used replaced Black with “White Supremacy” and “Neo-Nazi”, which were both deemed appropriate.
- TikTok blamed a [“technical glitch”](#) for the appeared censorship of the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #GeorgeFloyd, which had zero views.
- After Red Dress Day, Indigenous activists turned to Instagram to raise awareness for “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls,” only to find out that their posts had disappeared, due to a “global technical issue.”
- Black plus-size model Nyome Nicholas-Williams found out that her posts on [Instagram](#) were removed due to nudity, despite the fact that she was clothed in her posts.

The list goes on and on.

When stories like these go public, the social media giants just shrug their shoulders and blame it on “a technical glitch” or “an unintended consequence of our data.” And this is when AI becomes more harmful than good. The damage has already been done. BIPOC creators were silenced. The content was censored. The discrimination happened anyway. Companies can blame these acts of censorship on technical glitches because the public and policymakers know so little about how their systems are designed, what data they use, and who writes their algorithms.

However, as these stories continue to surface, more studies are being conducted on how these algorithms are affecting our culture. Two studies revealed that AI models that seek to identify hate speech were actually perpetuating racial biases. One study showed that tweets created by Black users were 1.5 times more likely to be flagged as hate speech.



In a 2020 guidance memorandum, the United States government acknowledged the risk that private AI applications pose. They associated the risk with principles of freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and respect for intellectual property, adding that these risks must be “carefully assessed and appropriately addressed” to maintain public trust.

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE BIPOC CREATORS ARE FACING WITH RESPECT TO AI?

For creators, social media platforms continue to be a source of conflict. On the one-hand, social media platforms lower entry barriers, making it easier for any new creators to not only share their art but create it. New apps make video editing, songwriting, and graphic design much easier and cheaper. On the other hand, these tools can make creators even more dependent on certain apps and IT solutions, resulting in an unbalanced relationship. To complicate matters more, antiquated laws regarding intellectual property have failed to keep pace with AI and tech in general.

As AI advances, the layman's ability to tell the difference between art that is created by real artists and those generated by a computer program is also being tested. In 2017, Spotify hired François Pachet, infamously known for his work creating "music written by computers." Fast-forward two years, and we later learned that over a billion streams on Spotify were possibly by "fake artists," a cost-saving move by the company to limit the number of royalties to be paid.

Spotify is not the only company to turn to AI for cost-saving and profit-making. Many other corporations are taking a different tact, by turning to Instagram influencers to push their brand in the name of social justice, further blurring the line between real-life experiences and social media's quasi-reality. These new "sponsored-content" tactics also put BIPOC creators in a tough spot, posing a new internal moral conflict.

YouTube posts, TikTok dances, Twitter memes and Instagram posts can seem trivial to a diminishing few, but these cultural contributions on social media play an outsized role in the public discourse. According to one study, the impact of social media plays a larger role on Black and Brown adults in comparison to their White counterparts. For example, Black and Brown adults are more likely to support a social issue or

specific cause that they see online. The feeling of belonging to a community online also appears to be stronger among Black and Brown users, and they are more likely to turn to online platforms when seeking more information about a cause or issue. This connection with online is not only stronger on the user side, but also on the content creation process. Black and Brown adults are more likely to feel that online is a better approach to building awareness on a particular issue than White adults. This gap between races and their approach to social media is important to how we interact, engage, and monitor these social media platforms.

WHAT POLICIES SHOULD WE, THE CREATIVE COMMUNITY, PUSH FOR?

It is imperative that we update our intellectual property laws and policymakers should be listening to TCC and others who are providing real solutions for how to keep up with AI. The system needs to be fairer, by appointing judges who understand the nuances of IP law within a digital world and who come from vulnerable communities themselves. When it comes to addressing these challenges, there are two potential tools in the toolbox that we can and should turn to.

The first are Intellectual Property laws. These laws are premised on incentivizing creators. They ensure ownership is respected and compensated appropriately. However, innovations in technology and commercial anti-competitive trust practices have pushed BIPOC creators in a direction that hinders their ability to authentically create and monetize their work. The second tool we have are antitrust laws. These laws are put in place to protect consumers from unfair business practices; however, big tech companies have a global monopoly on algorithms, artificial intelligence, and data. With little to no regulation on how these algorithms are designed and implemented, authentic narratives and voices of BIPOC are silenced and replaced with diluted narratives to fit into AI's flawed algorithm.

The elephant in the room is the fact that the algorithms that drive Big Tech are proprietary. Sure, the user can access and sometimes even control what data these companies collect. But the bigger question is who is making these algorithms and how are they being developed. So long as they are being created by humans, there will always be blind spots. This is why it is crucial to identify those blind spots, hold those in power accountable for the negative impact their algorithms can have, protect vulnerable communities, and push policymakers to enact policies that ensure fairness and safety. These haphazard policies to just appease one side of the social media industry only reveal who these executives are listening to (hint, it is not the creators or the users).

As Nick put it, *"it's an exploitative relationship"* that enables companies to profit off of BIPOC culture. The challenge of AI is not a new one, but the depth and breadth of its reach is testing our archaic laws, old norms, and bygone knowledge of technology. We can and must do more to protect our community.

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About The Series:

Take Creative Control Launched "The Series" to highlight the unique challenges that black and minority creators, artists and entrepreneurs faced during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. We received dozens of stories from entrepreneurs, artists, and shop owners about how they have had to adapt because of the crisis, what support they received, if any, and what assistance they will need in the future. The video series can be found on our website at <https://takecreativecontrol.org/take-creative-control-the-series/>.

About Take Creative Control:

Take Creative Control (TCC) is an initiative of the Institute for Intellectual Property & Social Justice, a nonprofit organization that works to ensure creators of color are empowered to protect, share, and monetize their creative works.



Meet Nick Huff Barili

Nick is an award-winning director, journalist and cultural anthropologist. After being told there was no mainstream interest in in depth interviews with hip hop artists, he founded the wildly successful YouTube channel @HARDKNOCKTV, and for the last 15 years he's been having important conversations with some of hip hop's finest, and has racked up over 100M views without ever paying for ads.

Check out Nick's YouTube Channel: [@HARDKNOCKTV](https://www.youtube.com/@HARDKNOCKTV)