Advancing Racial Literacy in Tech

Featuring Dr. Howard Stevenson

February 4, 2020

Thank you for coming to this conversation. I'm really excited. My name's is Mutale. I am a fellow at the Berkman Klein Center, and this conversation that I'm hosting is part of my ongoing work. But I'm most excited to host it during Black History Month-- and wearing my black, red, and green for unity and liberation, just to let you know.

So welcome. So this conversation is being recorded. We are not alone, so please be mindful of what you say, in terms of comments. If you do want to tweet at us, our handle is @BKCHarvard. And I am very excited, so just a little bit of place setting-- I have worked in technology for the last seven years, but 10 years prior to that, I was actually a journalist. I worked in broadcast at the BBC, and the beat that I looked at was science, technology, and youth-- which ultimately meant black people-- what are the black people doing, and how can you help us tell those stories?

I moved to the US around 14 years ago now, worked at CNN, and ABC, and all the letters. If that's your field, come and find me [INAUDIBLE] same newsroom, different boss, basically. And I got roped into technology around 2013 in New York City, when we were first starting to have hackathons and first thinking about teaching kids to code.

And that work led me into non-profits, led me to Google, led me to ultimately Weapons of Math Destruction, which is a book by Cathy O'Neill. Cathy O'Neill and I both work in-- both live in Brooklyn, New York. It was really easy to actually find her, because at the time, prior to her book coming out, she was coming to my local library to talk about this book that she didn't think would sell.

So it did sell. I did meet her. And as we went through the book, I began to be-- I began to ask questions about the legality of the technologies that she was describing, because many of them seemed predatory and many of them seemed to break rules. And I had, while transitioning out of broadcast and into technology, worked on the Obama campaign in Philadelphia, so had developed a huge Rolodex of people within the Congressional Black Caucus and progressive caucuses, and start to basically send them emails pretty much every day, where I was saying, this is happening in technology and this is actually illegal.

And this has racial and social justice implications, and somebody needs to be thinking about that [INAUDIBLE] that into-- eventually into becoming a fellow. I'm currently on the fellowship industrial complex [INAUDIBLE] as we speak at Harvard and Stanford, and in my first fellowship, was able to deliver on the introduction of three bills to Congress that were looking at technology.

But the way that I sold those to each of the committees was around this idea that anti-black racism was a threat to our national security. Luckily, for me, Cambridge Analytica happened just soon after, and then the Mueller report. And it was within the Mueller report that we were able to see how advertising algorithms were used to create black online identities and to reduce the Clinton vote.

So even though I seem very extreme initially by making that statement, and I seem very bold, the statement ultimately caught up to me, and ended up introducing the Algorithmic Accountability Act, which I can talk about afterwards. This is not for this conversation. DEEPFAKES Accountability Act-- because obviously, as a visual journalist, as a documentarian, I'm very concerned about the integrity of truth in the film.

And then finally, the No Biometric Barriers in Housing Act, which was looking at facial recognition as a way to gain entry into an apartment that you already own in Brooklyn, New York-- and ultimately, I'm here. So without further ado, I think you know who I am. I'm going to get into a conversation.

It's my pleasure to introduce you to Dr. Howard Stevenson, who is a clinical psychologist. He works at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. And even though this has absolutely nothing to do with the conversation, but it gives me a kick, he's Bryan Stevenson's older brother, and is actually depicted in the blockbuster movie-- I'm claiming it-- Just Mercy, which is in screens-- on screens now, right? On screens now-- and were you at Super Soul Sessions when your brother met Oprah?

No, I wasn't.

OK, so didn't meet Oprah, but close. And it really has provided the theoretical frames for this idea of racial literacy and technology. So if you wouldn't mind just welcoming him, I would appreciate that.

[APPLAUSE]

He's in conversation with Dr. Jessie Daniels, who teaches at the CUNY-- City University of New York-- with appointments at the Graduate Center. She has been researching race and-- technology and white supremacy for the last 25 years. I consider her one of my first teachers in this field after Cathy O'Neil, and then some other really cool white women in data science who were not scared to talk about race with me.

And she really was the intellectual leader and drive behind a report that we published through Data and Society last year called Advancing Racial Literacy in Tech. So if you wouldn't mind welcoming her also--

[APPLAUSE]

So I'm going to start with you, Dr. Stevenson. Would you mind telling us a little bit about who you are, how you came-- and how you came to this work?

So I am a clinical psychologist. I run a center called the Racial Empowerment Collaborative, and I have a team of colleagues, where we founded a partnership called the Lion Story, where we do training around the country around how to navigate racially stressful encounters, with the focus of helping people make healthy decisions in less than two minutes. And we've been working with young people as young as fifth graders to adults across a variety of police, education, health spectrums.

And so I started this because I grew up in a family with my brother Bryan and my sister Christy that seemed to have-- to talk about, as well as try to deal with racial politics growing up in southern Delaware. Anybody here heard of Delaware before? Well, we grew up in a very southern part of Delaware, which is different than the northern part of Delaware, where people were thought of, regardless of their racial background, as lower slower-- very country, very rural, very much like the south.

And the politics of race where we grew up was very much like being in the south because of the way in which folks would treat us in public spaces. My father and mother-- very different people, multi-culturally different. They had different styles about how they navigated racial politics. My father, growing up in southern Delaware, his belief for us and dealing with racial conflict was to have us in church 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

He believed, if anybody bothered us because the color of our skin, your job was to not get physical, not put your hands on anybody, but you're supposed to pray for them, believing that God would get them back in the end. He believed in retaliation. It was just a spiritual retaliation.

And so growing up in southern Delaware, church folk meant a lot to us, but they socialized us to think about praying around racial conflict. My mother grew up in North Philly. I don't know if anybody's heard of North Philly, but it's very different from southern Delaware. She said, if anybody bother you because of your race or your skin, you could not only put your hands on them-- you could pick up anything to help you navigate the problem-- very different processes, very different strategies.

She's very direct, more Malcolm X-like. He was more Martin Luther King-like. His approach, in my view, has led us to think about, how do you prepare, process racial moments? And my mother's view was more around, how do you speak up? How do you develop the skills to do-- to protest? And so my upbringing, as well as my brother's, would be around this notion of, how do you navigate those two kinds of approaches when you are confronted by racial moments-- in particular, by racial problems writ large?

Thank you. And Dr. Daniels, what brought you to this work?

Thanks so much for inviting me. It's such an honor to be in conversation with both of you today. So I was born and raised in Texas, and grew up with two parents who were ardent segregationists, and racist, and was very much their daughter-- and began arguing with my father early on about race in various ways. And when I eventually ended up in graduate school at the University of Texas Austin, I went into graduate school-- I'm deeply embarrassed to tell you all,

I went into graduate school still believing the lie-- one of the lies that my father had taught me, which was that I was Cherokee.

And part of what is so embarrassing about that, as most of you probably know in this room, is there's a wonderful book by Vine Deloria-- which I read in graduate school-- which is Custer Died For Your Sins in which he says, yes, every day in my office-- he worked at National Indian Affairs at the time-- every day, every week in my office, I have some white person comes in and tells me about their Cherokee grandmother.

And you may have heard a similar story on the political trail just recently. So it's a very common belief among white people. And I was chagrined to learn that I was not, in fact, Cherokee, and that I was kind of a cliche for believing that. But I think that one of the things that did for me is it kind of inoculated me in a particular kind of way against whiteness, because I was already in my 20s when I was in graduate school, and I hadn't really subscribe to the idea of being white, even though I was included in that group.

And then I began working with Joe Fagan and studying race and racism. This was in the late '80s, early '90s. And I got interested in the production of rhetoric by white supremacist. I went to the Klanwatch archive in Montgomery-- about a seven-hour drive from Austin, Texas-- and studied printed publications of Klan and allied groups that were producing this white supremacist rhetoric.

That was my dissertation. It became my first book, called White Lies. And part of what I found in doing that research was that these broadsheets, these newsletters produced by ardent white supremacists in the contemporary American context actually sounded very much like the mainstream political rhetoric I was hearing. So this is the early '90s.

You may be familiar with somebody named Pat Buchanan, who was running for president at the time on the Republican ticket. He gave a speech at the RNC that year that Texas humorist by the name of Molly Ivins said sounded much better in the original German-- and tracks very closely to the kind of rhetoric that we-- the anti-immigrant rhetoric that we hear today in political circles.

So I was really fascinated, by the way, that this extremist literature mapped onto the mainstream political white supremacy, and how we-- we meaning white people-- who thought about white supremacy use these sort of extremist groups to distanced ourselves from this uncomfortable truth that this was really at the core of extremist white supremacy.

In the middle of doing that dissertation, I was at a beloved aunt's house. I pulled the book off the shelf. It was Thomas Dixon's The Clansman. I said, Aunt Marie, why do you have this book? And she said, I don't know. I think it was your granddad's-- my father's father. Why would he have this book? Oh, he was in that group, honey.

I was like, what? So there I am in the middle of doing a dissertation on the Klan, and I learned that my paternal grandfather had been in the Klan. And for me, part of the reason of telling that story-- which also, I'm quite still ashamed about-- is that it drives home, for me, the fact that this is a-- it's a personal issue. This is also the grandfather that molested me when I was a child.

And I wrote about that in the White Lies book, the preface to that book before it came out. And I thought that my father would be very so proud of me when I wrote it. It's a lovely piece of writing. And instead, he had me locked in a psych ward for 72 hours. So for me, I tell all of that story to say-- PS, by the way, I'm working on a memoir-- but I tell that story to say this is very much, for me, a personal issue.

People oftentimes will come up to me and say, oh, it's so-- I actually had someone say to me one time, it's so good what you're doing for the black people. And I was like, that is not why I'm doing this work. This is very much for my own liberation, which I see as tied to the liberation of other people here. So fast forward to-- the internet happened after I wrote that book, and I followed those same groups into how they were making use of internet technology.

And that was my second book called Cyber Racism. I've written several others since then, but that experience of writing about white supremacy before and after the internet is where I come from-- and also have a very personal connection to this ideology.

Fun fact-- when I told my parents that I was working with the granddaughter of a Klansman, they were like, really? Is that what you want to do? You can come home. And then I did tell them that I was also working with Howard Stevenson, and they were like, does he know Bryan Stevenson? And I was like yeah.

And they were like, well, why did you work with him and not her? Because she just doesn't seem like a good idea. But I didn't listen, obviously.

[INAUDIBLE]

So my next question really gets to-- thank you both for being so honest about that-- this notion of racial literacy and technology, which is what has brought the three of us into conversation. So last year, like I said, I'm truly on the fellowship industrial complex. I had a rap sheet, it would be very long. So last year, Jessie and I were fellows that Data & Society in New York City. It's a research institute started by Danah Boyd, who's also a former fellow of Berkman Klein.

And one of the things that we became really interested in is we came to the Kennedy School for a conference on technology, and it was public interest technology. And in all the conversations that we had throughout the day, nobody spoke about race. And I had just come from really doing this intense work in Congress and with black legislators around the racial impacts, so we wanted to put something out-- a very, very short report called Advancing Racial Literacy in Tech.

We were looking for a theoretical frame to help us think about race and racism in a way that it's not this huge thing that nobody can solve-- and we're certainly not going to solve it in this conversation-- but to give us some tools to talk. Really, we were talking about billionaires at the time. I think that was our goal. We were like, if only Jeff Bezos could get this [INAUDIBLE]. Probably still hasn't read it. Hi, Jeff.

And that's how we came into conversation we've talked to Stephenson, who had written for schools. So we were looking to take a theory that was meant for families and for school

communities into the technical spaces that we were working-- in my case, Congress. And I sometimes speak with tech companies-- and in Jessie's case, the same. So my second question is really around-- for the people in this room so that we can start to discuss the concept-- could you in a really-- succinct way as you can, really talk us through what racial literacy is and how potentially we could become racially literate?

So for 30 years, I've been studying a topic called racial socialization, which predates the way we think about racial literacy. And that is, does it matter, for example, when parents talk to their kids about race? Does it help them navigate the world? Does it help them feel better about themselves? So these are questions I've been asking, and colleagues have been asking for 30 years.

And the example I give you is my mother being stressed out basically by being in southern Delaware, because her style was different, her approach was different. She alienated people, even when she walked through supermarkets. And we would go with her. Before we would go into the store, she would give us the talk. Don't ask for nothing. Don't touch nothing.

I don't care how many other kids are in the supermarket. They're not my kids. You got to listen to me. Anybody else get that talk when they're growing up? OK, that is a form of racial socialization. And we never acted up. We never would get out of trouble. She'd give us that talk over and over and over again, and the question-- I was always wondering, why do you give us the talk?

No, we're not going to act up, because we were too scared to act up, because we were in church all the time. The reason she did it, though, was to teach us a lesson that you can't just be concerned about. You also to be concerned about how other people perceive you. And that is a particular kind of skill. And so racial socialization is the conversations that parents might have with their children, verbal or nonverbal, but racial literacy is, what skills do you take away from those conversations that would allow you to be more agentic to with withstand the oppression that comes after you?

Whether it's around profiling, whether it's around slights or microagressions, or whether it's blatant physical assaults, how do you psychologically manage that? So for us, racial literacy is three things-- how well do you read, how well do you recast, and how well do you resolve a racially stressful moment? Reading would be, do I notice when a racial moment is happening around me?

Some people got this. Some people really don't get it. They don't know when a racial moment is occurring. It's also, well, how well do I read what's happening inside me-- my body? Do I know what my thoughts are doing? Do I know what my body's doing? And do I know what my emotions are doing? All of these influenced the decisions I'm going to make next.

Recasting is if I'm on a scale of on to 10-- 10 being highly stressful, one being not stressed at all-- if I'm at eight, nine, or 10, we consider that a threat-like condition, and you're a lousy decision maker if you are stressed during a racial moment at that level. And recasting is, how-- what

strategies-- mindfulness, prayer, support-- do I have to help me bring my eight, nine, or 10 down to a five, six, or seven?

We think a lot of police officers in these moments-- if you think about Tamir Rice example, he had about six seconds before the decision was made. If you're at 8, 9, 10 sort of scenario, we think any of us could make very unhealthy dangerous decisions in less than a couple of minutes-- so recasting.

Now, resolving is, how well do I make a healthy decision that isn't an underreaction to a racially stressful moment, or an overreaction? And do I walk away deciding in a way that matches my social justice values-- and not just beliefs, but I act justly-- not believe justly, but act justly? And so racial literacy is, how skillful can I negotiate? How competent can I be in negotiating a racially stressful moment?

Thank you. An Dr. Daniels, just taking the conversation back to technology, you were an expert witness in the briefings around the DEEPFAKE Accountability Act. And specifically, what I'm interested in-- what I would like for you to share with the room is, in terms of technical systems, how in your work have you seen them become racialized, and how and why specifically, if they are anti-black, how has that shown up?

One of the things-- and I mentioned the second book I did, which is called Cyber Racism-- it came out in 2009, which was early to be talking about race in tech-- but I had the advantage of having seen-- having watched these groups and printed publications before, and I was interested in how they were making use of this newfangled internet technology.

So some of them didn't make it, and that's a first thing to say. Some of them didn't make the transition, and some of them were just like, oh, internet. Sorry-- peace out. And others made a very clunky transition. There were some that did a-- tried to do sort of a copy and paste of the newsletter broadsheet form online-- and OK, but nobody was really clicking on that.

The most pernicious and nefarious of the presence I found in the early internet was a site that many of you may have come across, which is the MartinLutherKing.org website. And this was what I call a cloaked website, and by that, I mean it was an early form of propaganda or disinformation. And what they were trying to do was disguise the authorship of that website.

And part of what they were doing was they got domain name nomenclature. It's the early days of the internet. Most of your probably too young to remember this, but there was a time when we were teaching people and internet literacy, well, if you just look at the URL, if it doesn't say GeoCities forward slash somebody's name, then it's probably good to go.

And I interviewed people for that-- young people, aged 15 to 19-- for that book and asked them, so what do you think of this website? What do you think of MartinLutherKing.org-- when they would find it through a search engine-- at the time, AltaVista or Yahoo. But it always came up in the top three or four results. And they would say, well, I would trust it, because it has the URL. It ends in .org, so they must be dedicated to that. That's one of them said.

And then I had another young person in that research who looked at the text of the page, and she said, well, I don't know. This seems like they're dedicated to Dr. King, but it looks like it was created by a young person. So she was sort of cluing into the really basic GUI, and she was sort of cluing into that. But the danger in that right is that you just need a better GUI. You just need a better graphic designer to make a more pernicious presence.

The ones that really scare me, or the ones that really alarm me were the students-- there was another page on there, the young people who said, this page looks like it's another cloak site. This page looks like it's against-- sorry-- this page looks like it's saying slavery is OK, and I guess there are two sides to everything.

Which we've heard very recently.

Yeah, right-- an idea that has not gone away. But part of what I took from that was that our internet literacy-- the way that we were teaching internet literacy was flawed, because we were only talking about a kind of technical literacy about recognizing the URL, or figuring out who-- using the WhoIs database. God bless you-- using the WhoIs database to find out who published the site.

And those are all important technical skills to have, but there was another young person that I interviewed who said, I'm reading this text about slavery being OK, but I know from other things that I've read that slavery's not OK-- that it was brutal, that it was violent, that it was vicious. And to me, what that young person demonstrated was a kind of racial literacy.

And so for her, she was able to suss out and figure out the cloak site was a form of propaganda, because she had not only internet literacy, but she had racial literacy as well. And so that's actually in the conclusion of Cyber Racism, that I call for we need something more than just internet literacy-- we need racial literacy.

And it was before I knew of Dr. Stevens's work. But I think that there's a real way in which we have to combine those, and that came out just recently when we looked at-- when I was at Congress at [INAUDIBLE] invitation, and I was on a panel with Shireen Mitchell, who was talking about the disinformation campaign by the Russian government and Russian bots.

And part of what they did was they exploited our racial ignorance. They would create accounts that were fake black people, and that was part of what they used in that disinformation campaign. So I just want to say one other thing, if I could-- a slight caveat on our visit to the Public Interest Technology Summit that was at the Harvard Kennedy School. It's not quite the case that no one was talking about race, because they had the super smart, lovely professor Latanya Sweeney who spoke.

And everyone was blown away. And she did her presentation on her research about how Google advertising, the native advertising that you see when you sign into Google-- if you have a black sounding name like Latanya, then you're going to get these ads served up that are searching arrest records and bail databases for your name.

And she stumbled upon that, and found it-- and has done wonderful research on that. And everyone in that room, which was predominantly white-- all these people who were doing public interest technology fellowships were all like, that's fantastic. They were blown away by what she said, but then when she got off the dais-- when she got off the stage, everybody was like, OK, well, we don't have to think about race anymore.

And that was really-- for me, was a moment-- I was like, no, no. All the rest of us need to keep having that conversation. We can't just let Professor Sweeney, as wonderful as she is, carry all that weight. So in a way, for me, the racial literacy in tech is about sharing that burden, if you will, and sharing that challenge of thinking about race in tech. How is tech building race into these systems?

And we can't only leave it to people who are racialized as black or other racial identities to think about that. We have to all be engaged in that thought.

So thank you for that. One of the things that I found, when I was working in Congress and really trying to think about compelling storytelling-- specifically around facial recognition-- was to try and think about-- try and find case studies and try and think about scenarios where there was a certain civil rights frame because I'm speaking to a bunch of lawyers, and I'm trying to convince a bunch of lawyers.

One of the helpful things I was able to find out was, in New York City in the 1700s, the city council passed a law called the Lantern Law. And what that meant was anybody who was racialized as black would have to hold a light up against their face in the dark, because they were deemed dangerous by white New Yorkers. There were no street lights at that time, so my assumption is we couldn't see white New Yorkers either.

And they may be dangerous too, but they didn't have to have lanterns. And what that did was made me go and look at the projects close to where I live-- I live in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn-- BK in the house?

Brooklyn--

That's what I'm saying. Yes. Always-- so I live in Bed-Stuy. I call Bed-Stuy Wakanda, because it has these gorgeous brownstones which are surrounded by projects. And it's one of the reasons our gentrification looks a certain way, because you're always close to the projects. No matter how much you buy that brownstone for, you are close to the projects. But one of the things that I realized is that they floodlight the projects too in the same way that the lantern laws were being used in the same way that facial recognition that was being used.

And the reason we were able to enter that bill was I was speaking to the Congressional Black Caucus. Many of them looked at the projects in their own districts, and realized that there was a history of the surveillance of black bodies around this narrative of blackness and danger. And what we were doing through facial recognition was now building technical systems with those logics in mind, even though the response from companies were often, we didn't think about that, we didn't mean to do it.

And I'm famous for, in my work, saying your intention could kill me-- I'm interested in impact-- which is probably more like your mother than your father, but hey. So my final question, before we start to bring all the brilliant people in the room into the conversation, is many of the people that are listening to us now may be in similar scenarios, whether they're creating policies, they're creating-- they're sitting in a tech company maybe and they're looking at new products.

And how can we use some of these ideas about racial literacy to an audience who are not necessarily thinking about justice, who probably don't have social justice values-- the ones that we share? But how could we, in three minutes, push through to that particular audience?

Three minutes [INAUDIBLE]

Yeah, solve racism--

You go first.

--in three minutes.

OK, three minutes--

Yes.

OK, well, I think the racial threat research is helpful here in understanding, when people are face to face-- we're a culture that does not talk about race, but the reason we don't talk about it is we're viscerally fearful of what will happen to us if we start a conversation. Will I be thought of in a particular way? Will I be stereotyped? Will I be socially humiliated?

And so part of the notion of threat is that, if I spike at eight, nine, or 10 just when the word race shows up, let alone a racial tension, conflict that shows up-- or if I'm responsible, say, in my classroom on my beat in my family to navigate that problem, I feel incredibly inept. But you could argue that not just interpersonal interaction creates that sense of threat, but information.

So any information that comes to me around history that I don't know, I may just decide to not include it in my analysis, which is where I've learned from the two of you about how the stereotypes that-- in the same way that families socialize children around race, you could argue society has been doing it for centuries. And so if I'm uncomfortable with information around race, why would I use any narratives from that frame in my creation of products or in creation of code?

How you all have taught me that who we are gets sort of socialized into the work that we do-- and we know that's true in education and curriculum development. We know that's true in health care. We know that's true in justice around arrest, as well as sentencing. So why wouldn't it be true in technology?

Yeah. Yeah, I totally agree with all that. And I would just add, Dr. Ruha Benjamin from Princeton was in this very room last semester talking about abolitionist tools for liberation-- that

we've got to learn to build tools that work for our collective liberation, rather than perpetuating surveillance, and entrapment, and all that. And I would just say that I-- the question that I asked her at the time-- and still my provocation for that wonderful work that she does in the book Race After Technology-- is I don't know that we're going to get to building abolitionist tools without the scaffolding of racial literacy.

I really think that we need to build up a capacity for racial literacy among people who are building the technology. The other thing that I would say is that I think that the moment we're in right now tells us that the tech companies over the last 20, 30 years have not demonstrated an ability to regulate themselves. And so I think there really needs to be actual government policies, when we get back to having a government that makes policies and enforces them, that regulate the tech industry. So those are my two.

And I was going to ask you just to go slightly--

Sure.

--forward, if I may, before we open up, because I always think about the shooting in Charleston, and how Dylann Roof went into the church. So a white supremacist-- he's radicalized on the internet, and then goes in and shoots nine people at Bible study-- similar kind of narrative around Christchurch, this radicalization online. And we know from work of Joan Donovan, Claire Wardle, and others that algorithms are actually optimized to spread information that satisfies virality.

So could you just speak a little bit more about how white supremacy travels online, and how the technical systems that we build enable that? Because I think that that's also useful, as we think about rules and regulations and around those technology.

Right. So when I was finishing my dissertation and change that into a book-- was about 1995. And for those of you who remember, April in 1995 is when the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City was blown up by a white supremacist. So this is early days of the internet. Most people didn't have the internet in their homes or on their devices walking around, but that-- the description of that event and the technology that he used, being a rented moving truck and a bunch of fertilizer-- that got posted onto the internet.

That inspired a white supremacist killing in Oslo, Norway some 10, 12 years later, and then that-- specifically the killing in Oslo, Norway inspired the killing in Christchurch, New Zealand. And Dylann Roof was in all of that as well, the one in Charlottesville. So the point of that is saying that-- one of the points I made in Cyber Racism is that the spread of white supremacy is happening globally.

It's so much easier now than when I drove from Austin to Montgomery to get our cars from the Klanwatch archive. Now it's very easy to get access to that same kind of extremist material. And what's happened since about 2007, 2008 is that algorithms have sped up the spread of that information.

So like [INAUDIBLE] was just saying, as you probably all know, algorithms optimized for virality, and that's part of what happened in Christchurch when he put the shooting on Facebook Live and streamed it as he was killing people. And people are drawn to clicking on that, watching that, even if they are morally, spiritually, physically repulsed by it.

There's still something about the technology that compels us to click and share horrific things that we see online. And white supremacists know that and are exploiting it. They're what I call innovation opportunists. They see these back doors and the technology, and they walk right through them and use them for their own ends.

Thank you. Thank you both. So we've spoken a lot. I'm hoping that this is a conversation that we can have as family, as a community in this room. And I would like to open up for questions.

Hi. Sorry. I'm Todd [INAUDIBLE]. I'm a journalist and a fellow this year at Bergman Klein and Nieman Foundation. And thanks so much for starting this conversation-- really appreciate it. I'm really curious what type of response you've gotten when you've talked to people at technology companies. Have they been welcoming to this type of discussion, or have they been closed? And has it been changing over time?

I'm going to take that. It's interesting. We talked to people at tech companies when we were developing the report for Data & Society, and since then, we've heard from a lot of people at tech companies. There's kind of a bimodal distribution of responses that we hear. There's the sort sotto voce, on the down low-- this is great, love what you're doing. Officially, we have no need of this, the things that you're speaking of here.

So it's really a separate conversations. The sort of official response is, we don't need any sort of education about racial literacy. We are doing our own thing. It's usually implicit bias, and we're done after that. But people who work in HR at some of the biggest tech companies that you would recognize the names of, were I to name them, are like, this is really important and we need to have this.

And we also had one person specifically-- and I think maybe this is in the report-- say that the usual discussions around diversity, equity, inclusion-- DEI-- they say as a is often a cover. It's a way to avoid talking about race, and that the actual-- very much to Dr. Stevenson's work, that the very word race is racially stressful for the majority of people that are working in tech companies. So it's like it's a non-starter just because it's so stressful to even say the word race.

So the report only came out in May last year, but one of the things that I've started to see a change around is, as my work has-- is turning towards disinformation and is really facing journalists, and people understand that I am a journalist and I know how to use that tool, that certainly, people from-- people who are working in advertising are beginning to-- I'm noticing who's following me on Twitter.

And that's because of the Mueller report, so it was nothing that we said, but it was this external report, and the Blacktivists, and Woke Blacks, and these other-- so the Blacktivists and Woke Blacks, just for context, were social media pages created by the IRA in St. Petersburg to develop

black online communities that I was a part of spreading that disinformation. They started out with stuff like Girl Crush-- Woman Crush Wednesday. I was like, yes.

Black girl magic, me, and I'm part of this, and then I start to notice-- and this is in the report-- it became Hillary Clinton doesn't like black people-- which one of the things I will say about this information is that it starts in truth-- not saying she doesn't like them-- don't know-- still retweeting-- and then eventually, just before the election, don't vote for Hillary Clinton.

And then the report came out, and I think that there has been some reckoning around race, particularly from platform companies when they realized that they were gamed through these back doors. But the idea of racial literacy, just to be nice to black people, just doesn't-- it's not compelling. It's really not. We were actually told that we would have to go for people's reputational risk, which is a strategy-- like shaming people into calling them racists, and that's not really the work either.

Thank you very much. My name is [INAUDIBLE]. I am a fellow at the Berkman Klein Center also, and I'm a PhD student at NYU [INAUDIBLE]. So I have a question around the use of racial literacy in some-- I wouldn't say contradiction, but some different ways of reflecting race within marginalized communities. We have this concept of opacity. Many communities of color are claiming this right for opacity to be against that transparency, and this idea that also, to be complex doesn't mean to be completely transparent.

And I know that part of the work that you're doing with racial literacy somehow-- to push transparency [INAUDIBLE] understand all this interaction within race. So how to be articulating [INAUDIBLE] that is important, [INAUDIBLE] social justice, but at the same time, respecting this opacity that some communities of color want to reclaim their role in society?

I think that that's an important point. I just think that, without racial literacy, the people in tech companies or people who are making tech policies are never going to understand or acknowledge the desire, the request, the demand for opacity. There's no place that that can anchor in their understanding, because why wouldn't you want to be recognized? It just doesn't land with them.

I can certainly speak-- I didn't work on this piece of legislation, but Jessie and I have a colleague who worked on a predictive bail instruments. And there was a bill introduced in October of last year, and we were really trying to support her as she argued that criminal justice has-- is a racialized area. Therefore, when we think about how these algorithms should be audited, in terms of who deciding to get bail, we would have to have a very strong conversation about race.

And what we were being told on the other side is that this is just about technology, and it's not about race, and some people are bad. We were arguing against lawyers who graduated from this law school. Not to call the place that's given us free lunch out, but it just seemed like a very rudimentary argument. And there was no fact. The call for what communities of color [INAUDIBLE] in the spaces that we're describing are not relevant, because communities of color are just not relevant.

Did you have a question? [INAUDIBLE]

[INAUDIBLE]

[INAUDIBLE]

For each of you, what is the one thing that-- if you had the ear of Amazon, and Google, and Facebook, what's the one thing you want them to do right now that would advance toward the goal that you want?

Because I'm interested in how people react to moments, I'd be interested in how the folks you would identify, who write and who create these technologies-- what they would do emotionally and physiologically when they're presented with information about race, and politics, and history. And just to have a lesson-- and if we could hook them up to some gear that would allow us to understand how their bodies are reacting during these conversations, it would be a way to get a sense of this is not just benign information.

Race is involved in how we also exclude understanding, in the same way that we think about white flight, in the same way that we think about the sense of threat that this information means about me. Many of us who are academics, we struggle with, how are we going to deal with new knowledge that we didn't grew up with that we've still got to integrate is threatening to us?

And so I think the same is true for those who haven't even been exposed. And I think you've both described the level of ignorance around race in our society in the way that, we could argue, in families like mine, where it was socialized more directly-- not only through actions, but music-- you could argue other people are equally as ignorant. And so every young person that shows up who hasn't had an exposure-- not only to racial knowledge, but how to manage it emotionally-- that is not a threat to who they are-- to learn this stuff.

We're going to be working very hard for time to come. The only other thing I would add to that is I feel very hopeful, if people are willing to face those fears, that they could bring their eight, nines, and 10's down to five, six, and seven, and they can see their own stories and their own narratives, as you described your own narrative as not a sort of indictment on your own humanity, or being bad, as it were.

So it's very hopeful, if people can listen, if people can admit to these notions. So I would love to watch people and talk to them while they're processing this information.

I think, if I had their ear, I would say to them, accept regulation and back off-- and not because I believe in the-- well, two things-- I grew up in the UK. I grew up with a welfare state cradle to grave. I grew up with unions being part of how we lived. And I also, in my very early life-- my very young life-- grew up hearing my parents talk about what a disaster Margaret Thatcher was.

So I've grown up in a country that has-- is imperfect, and moving to the right, like many other countries in Europe, and making really poor decisions. But this idea that the state will protect poor people, the state will protect marginalized people is very strong in my imaginary. And I'm very much struggling with the libertarian ideals of Silicon Valley.

So last week, I was at Stanford. I went to John Perry Barlow's archive. They just got it recently. That's what I thought. And as I was reading the papers-- my friend is writing a book based on these archives, so I was reading the papers, and the kind of romanticism around the market will save us and-- the market will save us mad me kept thinking, but the state has, in many ways, saved me, both as a child, both as an adult.

And we do need people who can think about regulations that both allows for innovation and allows for capitalistic growth, but at the same time, we can, if we see hate speech online, that there are some at least guidelines around that-- if we are looking at technologies that are predatory and racially marked, that there can be a legal standard for us to even consider that.

We were in a smaller conversation prior to this, where we were looking at the NYPD's defense of facial recognition technology in identifying suspects, and the very last line in the article was basically, we have no rules so we're going to do what we want. That scares me. The NYPD-- not the friends of the people living in-- with the blacks. That's the thing that I would say, and that's a conversation that I'm in back and forth.

Yeah, I think I would say ban Nazis. Take the white supremacist threat to your tech platform seriously, and get them off. And there's a whole other conversation to be had about free speech and hate speech, and I just think we can adopt the European model, where you value free speech, but you also see it as balanced in a human rights framework as in conversation with the right not to be annihilated or have your people-- the recommendation of your people being annihilated.

I think that's one of the first things. And secondarily, I would just say, rethink surveillance. Think of a different business model than surveillance. Jeff Bezos, don't sell anymore Ring doorbells. Just zero that column out in your spreadsheet. Don't need any more of those. Pull them off the market. Get rid of them. It's a terrible technology. It's going to get someone killed, if it hasn't already.

Hi-- Jessica [INAUDIBLE], assistant director of the Cyber Law Clinic here. Last month, we released a study on a bunch of the different AI ethical principles that are around the world, and I was thinking about-- one of the principles that we saw pretty commonly in that report was a call for increased inclusively on development teams for AI tools. And I was thinking about that in terms of the theme of today's talk, racial literacy and technology.

And this is sort of a follow-up on the previous question set me up well which is, if these companies that are developing AI tools are going to build more inclusive teams, what do they have to do to help their existing staff get prepared to work effectively on more diverse teams?

Want to take that?

Well, if we look at what happens in other institutions, where diversity-- and usually, it's a demographic diversity call. In some places, it's a brochure diversity. You only see it in the brochure of the institution. But when changes are made in the team, the stress levels go up dramatically.

And so one argument in hiring process is why many places think about fit as the final determination of-- between two candidates about who should get in, it's usually based on-- fit is a-- is code for this person would stress me out less or would stress us out less-- or they get our mission better, which is they'll stress us out less. And I think that is a form of racism that's unintentional and intentional, because it's systematically consistent across different systems.

And so I would prepare every system about that, what you're going to be afraid of, from the before the hiring process begins-- and to take notes along the way. And I think this is true for those of us who've been the only one in the room-- whether it's around gender, around race, or whatever-- that you have to also have your own medal and be prepared for how you use your voice.

[INAUDIBLE] will never be known as long as the hunter is the one's to tell it. So who is going to be the voice in those rooms courageous enough to challenge others' stress around difference? And I think, in a sense, we've always had one person in a room, but one is not enough. But how you get two in the room-- I think leaders can be better and more literate about how they are also afraid in those processes. And we can do something about it.

Yeah. I just want to add one thing to that. I totally agree with all that, and I think-- I've seen it play out before. I left academia for a while and went to work in a dot-com back when that was still the first bubble. And I was the only out lesbian there, and I became fast friends with the only African-American who was employed by that company.

We both ended up getting laid off at different times, but so I've seen this dynamic in-- play out in tech companies. And one of the things that I would just add to talking about how diverse teams change that dynamic is that there's something-- and I'm struggling for a better way to say this, so pardon the academic jargon, but there has to be a move to de-center whiteness.

And here's what I mean by that. If I'm white-- I've grown up in or if I'm included in that category of whiteness-- I've grown up in a culture, in a society which has at every turn told me that I'm the smartest person in the room, I know the answers, I need to lean in to take over leadership of whatever group I'm in. And de-centering whiteness, to use that clumsy phrase, is to learn to read the room and go, oh, look, there are racial dynamics happening here.

The first in your three-part step is read the racial moment and go, oh, I'm participating in this thing that's happening. And if I can just shift so I'm not the smartest, the one that needs to lean in and take over leadership-- if I can just step back a little bit, it's going to change the dynamic in the room.

And that, I think, is a crucial skill in racial literacy that white people have to develop is to learn not to lead, not to be the first one on the mic, not to be the one who's going to-- well, I can run that committee. Step back and see if things don't feel better for everybody in the room.

And I think, for me, I recently-- I wrote an op-ed in the summer, and as part of my research, I was looking at the number of black researchers in AI across Facebook, Google, and Amazon.

And I found one. And she's an intern [INAUDIBLE] she's not an intern anymore. She was an intern last year. and she went to Berkeley.

And I contacted her, and she just really needed that internship to finish her program, but she felt so uncomfortable, because every racial-- she worked on the Google Brain team, so they're doing a lot of health-- predictive health work. And she just felt incredibly stressful, because white people were constantly asking her, are you OK? Are you comfortable?

And she had to say yes, because she needed the internship, but she was like, no, I hate it here. I straight up hate it here. There is no way for me. So I don't necessarily know how to prepare the teams. There has to be some type of culture shift that the organization makes, while it's still white, to prepare itself, because the black person's prepared often, and is going to war late.

I've been on this for-- this is my second semester. This is my third hairstyle. I have to do certain things when I'm moving in certain spaces to get what I want, because even just showing up is so threatening.

[INAUDIBLE]

Thank you so much for hosting this event. So a follow-up to the previous question-- I mentor a lot of undergrads and grad students, and some of them are going into these spaces that are majority white, majority male. How do I advise them, in terms of, on one hand, I do want them to succeed in these spaces that are not open to them-- at the same time, I don't want them to feel excluded or feel mentally unwell because they're dealing with racism and sexism in their everyday workplace. Do you have any advice?

[INAUDIBLE]

So James Baldwin said that the mouse always knows more about the cat than the cat knows about the mouse. And part of that is there's no way you could be in any of these systems and not take a hit on your health, both physical and mental. The argument for why we need socialization taught is to prepare you.

And this is my mother's interest, that I can't change those environments. It would be nice if I could. The supermarkets should just be where you go get food. It shouldn't be a warzone for racial stress. But it is that, and so I'm going to prepare you for that. And I think we don't do that, particularly in these Ivy League institutions, where there is this sort of mantle of smart hanging over everyone.

But it means something very different. So the issue is not if you're going to be stressed. You're going to be stressed. The question-- are you prepared for it? And I would argue, in my in 30 years at Penn-- I used to be the faculty master at the boys' College House, which was a safe zone for students of color-- particularly African-American and African students. But part of it was socializing them to prepare them to go back into the rest of the campus.

And we took that seriously, and I think a lot of places don't take that seriously, because we think of egalitarianism as not speaking very directly to how some people-- this is a fair place, and for other people, it's not a fair place. So I wouldn't let you go out into the cold with just your underwear on and freezing, and the same is true in the racial climates that we exist.

And I think we can be prepared for these notions. And I think it affects us internally as well. To not get the protection means we're going to question ourselves. We're going to question our histories. We're going to question people who look like us. And we're going to sometimes not finish the trek or the journey while we're here.

There's another thing we say is that our job is to help you fall in love with your own story. And part of that means preparing you for other people who clearly create narratives about you where you are not human, you're not adequate. So it's not if. It's a matter of when, and are you ready for it?

Can I just add one thing to close-- almost close this out? I just want to say that there's another piece here that we haven't really talked about, and that's the-- so many of us in the room are our scholars or are scholars in training around doing technology. And I just want to make a plug for the fact that, if you're studying technology, if you're interested in technology, that you have to take into account race, that you have to understand that systemic racism is not something that's in a separate bucket-- that it's woven into technology.

And if you, say, come out with a giant book that's 700 pages about surveillance capitalism and you never mentioned race, I think that's a form of scholarly malpractice. You've got to take seriously the way that racism is implicated in these systems, and if you don't, then you're only telling a partial story.

Thank you, everybody, so much for your time and for your attention. And come and see us afterwards, but thank you so, so much.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]