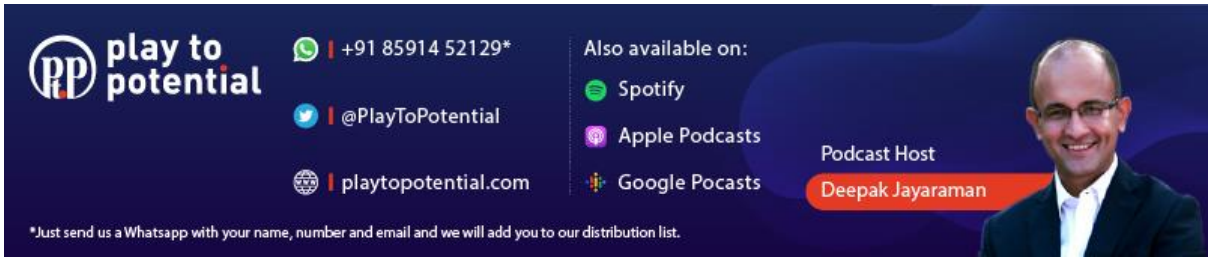

Context to the nugget

Kartik speaks about how, if we are not watchful, algorithms might end up creating outcomes that we hadn't really pictured when we started using them. He speaks about one particular example of an instance with Amazon where using algorithms to screen resumes led to the gender bias being further amplified before Amazon noticed it and addressed it.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Moving to a different theme in the book Kartik, you talk about a likely hood of unanticipated consequences in the world of AI and you speak about the initial momentum in a certain direction suddenly can snowball into an avalanche and you also quote I found the metaphor of the cobra effect interesting in this context so could you talk to the listeners about insight here?

Kartik Hosanagar (KH): Yeah sure, the Cobra effect is an interesting effect where we don't know the exact details of this but legend has it that way back during British rule in India, specifically in Delhi one of the governors there wanted to get rid of what he perceived as a cobra menace, there were just too many cobras and therefore the government announced the bounty for anyone who catches or brings the cobra head and so the idea was this would result in hunting or cobras and snakes and would ultimately help bring down the population. Now, initially it seemed to bringing lots of people who would come in and produce cobras and collect the bounty but again the legend has it that what was happening was that once people realised that there is a bounty if you bring in Cobras they started breeding cobras and they started breeding these and bringing it in and collecting the money and so it wasn't really addressing the problem and in fact when the government realised it and said the bounty is no longer available people just released whatever they were breeding into the wild, making the problem worst so it was one of those situations when there were perverse outcome awaiting this person and essentially what I call unanticipated consequences, you thought what this would do is reduce the cobra population but the unanticipated consequence was that it actually might have increased the cobra population and I bring that up because this notion of unanticipated consequences has been around and sociology for a while and certainly with a lot of human decisions we know these things happen where you intent to fix something and you make it worst by your intervention and there's many examples of where this is happened and when it comes to algorithmic decisions again we have to worry about the same thing that sometimes you bring in an algorithm to fix something and if you will not careful it can make that worst and because it's automated decisions it can make it worst very fast and there will be many examples of this so, late last year there was a news story about Amazon using recruiting algorithms and the news story essentially kind of was talking about the fact Amazon hired over 100 thousand people last year probably got millions of job applications, it's hard for a team of human recruiters to shift through that many resumes and figure out who to invite for job interviews, so they wanted to automate that process and they looked at

previous data on what kinds of applicants did well in interviews, what kinds of applicants did well at Amazon and got promoted after they joined and they essentially used that as a training data for a machine learning system that did the resume skimming. Now, according to that writer's news story it turns out the internal investigation later showed that this AI system had big gender biases and it had gender biases because, you know if you think about it the training data is decisions made by humans on who to promote? Who to give offers to? And if there's a gender bias in those decisions, those biases get captured by the AI system and it learns it and it almost institutionalises that bias. Now, fortunately Amazon detected it, it's a savvy tech company and so it detected it and stopped using the system. There are many companies using these kinds of systems who are not as savvy as Amazon, not running these tests and there's other examples ultimately these AI systems are making decisions based on data and so if there's problem in data they pick them up and then its snowball and could go out of control. It was the study that showed that algorithms used in court rooms in the US to make sentencing decisions are the ones used in Florida has a race bias and these race biases they are probably because of biases in the data itself there are many other settings, there are examples of biases and the auto-complete suggestions that Google makes and again the Google auto complete suggestions are based on search queries people are typing and so it picks up some of their biases as well and so there's many examples where some of these problems may go out of control if you are not careful, a classic example one that I mention in the book is when you have recommendation algorithms recommend to you, you know what you should listen to or what kind of music you should listen to, what videos you should watch? If you have very narrow set of interests and the algorithm isn't careful it can just show you just more and more of what you like and so you go further and further down this tunnel and maybe you are enjoying what you are seeing but you don't know what else is out there? And so again this narrow interest can become narrower and could snowball out of control if the algorithms are not carefully decided.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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End of nugget transcription

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Kartik Hosanagar - Nuggets

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- 44.01 Kartik Hosanagar - Staying relevant as machines get smarter
- 44.02 Kartik Hosanagar - Predictability Resilience paradox
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- 44.05 Kartik Hosanagar - Unanticipated consequences and "Cobra effect"
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work here.

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