

Algorithms That Do Harm

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Algorithms are not neutral. Gina Rosenthal and Angelia McFarland welcome Marian Newsome — a technologist with decades in the field, from coding in FORTRAN to working as an ethical hacker at Accenture to serving as Portfolio Manager for Security and Resilience at Dell Technologies. Together, they explore how algorithms encode human bias, how data collected for convenience gets repurposed in ways we never consented to, and what it will take to build more ethical technology systems.

SPEAKERS

Angelia McFarland

Co-host; tech marketing veteran and founder, EOP Media

Gina Rosenthal

Co-host; technologist, product marketer, and founder, Digital Sunshine Solutions

Marian Newsome

Guest; Portfolio Manager, Security and Resilience, Dell Technologies; ethical hacker; 25-year technology veteran. Find her on LinkedIn and on Twitter at @LRTech.

TRANSCRIPT

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Welcome to the Tech Aunties podcast, where we're bringing you industry context and vision from myself, Angelia McFarland, and Gina Rosenthal. On each podcast, we will share our marketing and technology industry experiences along with the team. Listen to us as we explain the past so you can have context to understand and create your own version of the future. So let's get into it.

GINA ROSENTHAL

We have Marian Newsome with us today. Marian works as Portfolio Manager for Security and Resilience at Dell Technologies. She is not a newcomer to the technology world — she's been laying cable in heels and a skirt since the eighties. Marian, welcome.

MARIAN NEWSOME

That's right. I used to work for Avis. I was in their software development program, started as a network administrator. And yeah — women could not wear pants at the time. You had to have your business suit on with heels and hose, and out there laying cable.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

You're the original tech auntie. And you've coded in FORTRAN?

MARIAN NEWSOME

I have. We are literally a dying breed. One of my really big goals is to reach out and mentor other women coming into the tech field. I recently had a health scare — and one of my nurses used to be an engineer, really loved it, had an advanced degree, and left because of the toxic environment for women. It really made me think back to when I first entered technology. I was saddened that it hasn't changed culturally enough. Young women are still leaving the field for the same reasons.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Technically, to get to our topic — that is an algorithm. When you say 'algorithms that do harm,' it removes individual choice from the equation. Algorithms have been going wrong because humans code and we're not perfect. And there are coders who have different motives for putting different hooks in code. That's not going to change.

MARIAN NEWSOME

They were. And some of the algorithms that went wrong are the reasons we have compliance laws now around Gramm-Leach-Bliley and financial data. That's not going to change. Even if I'm coding AI, I may still want a back door — because if something goes wrong, I want to be able to get in and fix it.

GINA ROSENTHAL

All humans have bias. That's how we create societies. When we create an algorithm, it should be our job to identify and remove bias. But there's also bias in the data itself.

MARIAN NEWSOME

When I register my refrigerator and you collect my age, sex, and location — if I self-identify differently than what you'd think, I'm not going to give you correct data. And immediately you put me in a profile, target me for ads, do different things. You may not have an accurate picture of who I am. Then you start using AI to mine that data — and the result might not be applicable to me at all.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Sometimes it's the algorithm doing harm. Sometimes it's the person pulling the data who's doing harm. The algorithms on period trackers are doing what they're supposed to do. The problem is that data is available to people doing things with it that benefit themselves but not the person who generated it. Do I own my data? Or does somebody else own you?

MARIAN NEWSOME

There have already been examples. In one case I know of, law enforcement pulled photos off of social media and misidentified a suspect who was then arrested — a person of color. With AI and social media filters, what I look like in a photo may not be what I look like in person. The voice you hear may not be what I actually said. There needs to be some type of ethics and transparent consent so people know exactly what their data is being used for.

MARIAN NEWSOME

I want to step up on my personal platform for a moment. I'm a recent kidney transplant recipient. If you have a passion for helping others who are in need — please sign up to be a donor. My donor was a 30-year-old male. He has given me new life and the energy of a 30-year-old. Always bring life into everything that you do. Speak life into your body. Speak life into your career, into your dreams.

GINA ROSENTHAL

Where can people follow you?

MARIAN NEWSOME

I'm on LinkedIn — and on Twitter at @LRTech, which is my alter ego. That's where you find me.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Thank you for joining us today on the Tech Aunties podcast. Until next time.