

When the media comes calling: On handling sudden media interest in research and its production

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Towards best practices in public engagement by linguists: Responsibilities, strategies, ethics, and impact

LSA 2022

January 7, 2022

Timeline

- *Sept 8, 2020*: Dr. Timnit Gebru DMs me on Twitter asking if I knew of any papers on the risks of large language models (by me or others); I don't.
- *Sept 8, 2020*: In the DM conversation we brainstorm about the risks and I propose writing a paper about it together.
- *Sept 10, 2020*: PhD student Angelina McMillan-Major joins the effort and I send Dr. Gebru an outline, proposing we target the FAccT 2021 deadline of Oct 7, 2020.
- *Sept 15, 2020*: Dr. Gebru brings on other members of the Ethical AI team at Google: Dr. Ben Hutchinson, Dr. Vinodkumar Prabhakaran, Dr. Mark Díaz, and Dr. Margaret Mitchell

Timeline

- *Oct 7, 2020*: Paper submitted to FAccT 2021, after going through “PubApprove” at Google
- *Nov 18, 2020*: Google co-authors told to remove their names from the paper or retract it, without being given specific feedback/requests to edit.
- Dr. Gebru pushed back on this treatment: The Google co-authors were literally doing what they were hired to do.
- *Dec 2, 2020*: Google fires (“resignates”) Dr. Gebru, announced on Twitter by Dr. Gebru herself.
- *Dec 3, 2020*: I wake up to first news articles and realize I’ll be getting contacted by the media.
- *Dec 4 or 5, 2020*: Someone leaked the PubApprove version to Reddit

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

We read the paper that forced Timnit Gebru out of Google. Here's what it says.

The company's star ethics researcher highlighted the risks of large language models, which are key to Google's business.

By Karen Hao

December 4, 2020



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A leading AI ethics researcher says she's been fired from Google

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Timnit Gebru says she's facing retaliation for conducting research that was critical of Google and sending an email "inconsistent with the expectations of a Google manager."

By Kare

By Karen Hao

December 3, 2020



The New York Times

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By Kare

By Karen Hao

December 3, 2020

Google Researcher Says She Was Fired Over Paper Highlighting Bias in A.I.

Timnit Gebru, one of the few Black women in her field, had voiced exasperation over the company's response to efforts to increase minority hiring.





▲ DOW +0.25% ▼ S&P 500 -0.37% ▼ NASDAQ -1.44%

FEATURED The US economy in 12 charts

Google widely criticized after parting ways with a leading voice in AI ethics

By [Rachel Metz](#), [CNN Business](#)

Updated 11:10 PM ET, Fri December 4, 2020

By Karen Hao

December 3, 2020



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TECH

Google ouster of top AI researcher Timnit Gebru draws sharp new scrutiny of how it treats Black employees

Jessica Guynn USA TODAY

Published 5:15 a.m. ET Dec. 11, 2020



Reading



SUNDAR PICHAI · Published December 9, 2020

Google CEO apologizes after AI researcher's dismissal, is sorry it 'seeded doubts'

2,278 Googlers have signed a letter in support of fired ethics researcher

My personal timeline

- Wow, this is intrusive. The paper isn't even finished yet!
- But wait: I see what Dr. Gebru is doing with the media attention, and I have an opportunity to help
 - Underscore the message about discriminatory practices against Black women in tech
 - Show that the research Dr. Gebru was involved in was solid and important (non-defensively, speaking with gravitas of *University Professor*)
 - Get the word out to the public about the hazards of large language models (because effective regulation requires public awareness)

Collections of the better coverage

- Stochastic Parrots: <http://faculty.washington.edu/ebender/stochasticparrots.html>
- My interactions with the media in general: <http://faculty.washington.edu/ebender/media.html>

Timeline

- *Dec 17, 2020*: “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models be Too Big? 🦜” accepted to FAccT 2021.
- *Jan 24, 2021*: Camera ready submitted, with authors Emily M. Bender (University of Washington), Timnit Gebru (Black in AI), Angelina McMillan-Major (University of Washington), Shmargaret Shmitchell (The Aether)
- *Feb 19, 2021*: Google fires Dr. Mitchell
- *Mar 7, 2021*: Paper presented at FAccT
- *August, 2021*: Dr. Mitchell joins Hugging Face
- *Dec 2, 2021*: Dr. Gebru announces Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR)

Case study #1

pre-parrots

- Interview/feature piece with journalist from University's own newsletter
 - "Siri, Are You Guessing?" Nancy Joseph, *Perspectives*, 10/1/2019
- Relaxed/fun interview
- Chance to review the full piece after it was written
- *Still* somehow missed the fact that it made it sound like I wasn't building on other people's work
 - <https://twitter.com/emilymbender/status/1179489808860639232>
- #CiteBlackWomen

Case study #2

Stochastic Parrots immediate aftermath

- Karen Hao of the *MIT Technology Review* asks for the manuscript Dec 4
- Introduced to me by a trusted contact as a journalist who does good work
- Consulted with Dr. Gebru and agreed to share it
- Result: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/12/04/1013294/google-ai-ethics-research-paper-forced-out-timnit-gebru/>
- Pretty quickly followed by many more such requests; established a policy between us so we didn't need to keep consulting each other each time (time management)

Case Study #3

Twitter DMs

- Rachel Metz first contacted me by email Dec 7 2020
 - with a link to a piece she'd already written asking for the paper and then asking some follow-up questions
- She contacted me again in late February for another piece about what happened at Google and the challenges of doing research in industry
- After our phone conversation, she followed up to ask for the Twitter DMs; Dr. Gebru agreed, so I sent them as a text file.
- CNN's fact checker required screen shots of the DMs (a good sign) so I sent them too
- Result: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/11/tech/google-ai-ethics-future/index.htm>

Case study #4

Lack of due diligence

- Contacted by producer of BBC Radio 4's *Analysis* with host Michael Muthukrishna about a “documentary [...] investigating the influence of modern social justice movements on the scientific community and scientific research”

- My reply:

I would be interested in participating on the condition that the documentary features the voices of a diverse group of researchers. I'm very concerned about what happened with the CBS 60 Minutes episode this week (where they erased the key work of Black women researchers on biases in face recognition technology and the impacts of such technology on Black communities when used for surveillance).

Case study #4

Lack of due diligence

- Producer said yes, they were looking to talk to diverse researchers and could I introduce him to anyone?
- Asked my colleague (Dr. Brandeis Marshall) first, & on her yes, sent the intro
- Interview seemed ... oddly framed, and worrisome
- The host thanked me afterwards for “nuanced” answers
- The piece was finally published with the title “Science in the Time of Cancel Culture?” and included among the other guests Steven Pinker and Pedro Domingos

Abstracting some best(?) practices

- Look into media training at your university/employer
- What follows are really just my own reflections, organized by:
 - Before agreeing to speak
 - Before speaking
 - While speaking
 - After speaking

Before agreeing to speak

- Journalists are usually on a tight deadline, but their urgency doesn't have to become your urgency. It's okay to say no or even fail to reply.
- Check their previous work: Who do they talk to? Do they present the science clearly?
- Work the grapevine: Have other people who talked with this journalist had a positive experience?
- Check the venue, especially if unfamiliar
- Who else are they talking to? (Avoid being on a manel/waaah-nel)
- How are they framing the initial request to you?

Before speaking

- Negotiate the modality: they may prefer phone, but you can offer to give replies over email
 - Phone can take less time and also lead to more interesting back & forth and shorter, more quotable sentences
 - Writing lets you choose words more carefully
- Plan out the main points you want to get across & write some notes.
- Plan out the people you want to cite and have their full names in front of you while you speak. #CiteBlackWomen
- Ask if you can “fact check” direct quotes

While speaking

- Word choice can subvert style sheets via direct quotes ("Dr.")
- Keep in mind that journalists will likely quote the juiciest thing you say and that they may not contextualize it the way you would.
- The person you're talking directly to is likely way more informed than the people who will ultimately read your words

While speaking

- It is fine to decline to answer specific questions, and preferable if they are asking you to speculate on something outside your expertise
 - “That is outside my area of expertise” buttresses your actual expertise
- If something comes out a way that you don't like, you can say: Please don't quote that part.
- You can record too (but ask permission/let them know), in case something gets taken out of context

After speaking

- If you are offered a chance to “fact check”, keep an eye out for that email and be prompt
- Just because you talked to a journalist doesn't mean you'll be quoted
 - Sometimes that's okay
 - Other times, the journalist is taking advantage
- If something is really wrong you can ask for a correction
- Twitter can be useful for both promoting good pieces and pointing out issues with bad ones (though sometimes ignoring them is even better)

So, is it worth it?

- Scholarship is a conversation
- Ideally, not just with other scholars but with the general public
- As linguists, we work on many things that touch on public policy and other decision making which relies on an informed public
- So media attention is a great opportunity
- And it's work
- And yes, it's worth it — though it's also important to be selective