Suchana Seth, a physicist-turned-data scientist, talks about the dangers of prediction errors and the importance of developing algorithms that are fairer, more transparent, and more accountable.

Technology is transforming every area of our lives. But as it opens new avenues and shows us fresh possibilities, tech can also deepen existing inequalities. We believe in harnessing technology to serve justice and the public interest—and we see a wealth of opportunities to do so. That’s why the Ford Foundation is working with a community of partners to develop a path for people to use their technology skills to change the world for the better: the professional field of public interest technology.

Transcript begins.

Suchana Seth: One of my favorite quotes is by Jeff Hammerbacher, who went on to leave Facebook and found a company called Cloudera. He said something like, “The best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click more ads. That sucks!” As a data scientist, I can relate to that on a very visceral, personal level. We still don't have clear, clear paths for data scientists who want to work in the field of public interest technology. That’s something that we should be trying to create a road map for.

Hi, I'm Suchana, and I'm a champion for data for good. Algorithms make different kinds of errors, and there are different costs associated with these prediction errors. I develop responsible machine learning best practices, to make algorithms fairer and more transparent and more accountable. This year I was an Open Web Fellow at Data & Society—a research institute that examines issues at the intersection of technology and social impact and ethics. As part of my fellowship, I have been working on a technical report that looks at how algorithms can become unfair.

The other critical piece is to educate data scientists about the ethical nuances that they’re likely to encounter in their jobs, and to develop standards against algorithmic bias. And this is something that global standards bodies have already taken a pretty strong stance against — algorithmic bias—so, I think the future looks pretty optimistic. It’s very easy to demonize
technology—artificial intelligence and machine learning, in particular, in the light of all the media stories that we’ve been seeing around fake news and algorithmic bias—but it’s important to remember that technology is also a tremendous power for social good. And it’s up to technologists like us who care about social good to keep reminding everyone about this, and to keep demonstrating through our work that technology can indeed make a difference.

[Ford Foundation logo: a globe made up of a series of small, varied circles. Mozilla logo.]

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