

NASPAA Competency: Diversity & Communication

Coded Bias Reflection

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***Editorial note:** part of the following content was originally submitted on September 29, 2024 as a one page reflection assignment for the Technology and Public Administration course. For my MPA Capstone Portfolio, I added biographical and contextual information and the respective sources to explain and justify how this artifact conveys the core competency of Diversity and Communication.*

Coded Bias in Artificial Intelligence

Honestly, as a white person in the United States I am continually shocked when my Black friends speak to me about their experiences. I am embarrassed by my ignorance and naivety. I feel shame because of micro-aggressions that I have been part of in the past. *Coded Bias* reminds me of those conversations (Kantayya, 2020). I did not know what the video was going to be about, and I all too ignorantly had never considered the origins and the founding (white) fathers of artificial intelligence in this country.

Context and Background

Coded Bias is a documentary that focuses on an MIT graduate student Joy Buolamwini whose research proved that facial recognition software failed to detect her own face until she wore a white mask. Buolamwini discovered how the blind trust we give AI is not only unwarranted, but also dangerous, especially for a person who is Black. Conducting a research study, Gender Shades, Timnit Gebru and Joy Buolamwini inspired conversations with and about big tech companies to be accountable. Their research even spurred the development of the Algorithmic Justice League, which is a digital advocacy group that fights for accountability in artificial intelligence systems. Since Buolamwini created the documentary *Codes Bias* she has spoken at many forums, including the Supreme Court, advocating for change in the AI industry (Coded Bias, 2025).

This powerful documentary was presented in Rutgers' Technology and Public Administration course. The video highlighted how diversity has not been part of the "traditional" conversation and how leaders of today need to ensure we communicate to, for, and with the diverse populations we serve. My initial viewing of the documentary caught me by surprise.

The "System's" White Face Mask

The scene that I cannot stop thinking about is when I saw the white face mask. I expected some sort of reference to a masquerade ball. I realize now that my thought was inappropriate and insensitive, but I just could not even fathom where the brilliant researcher was going with it. Then I saw the visualization of how the white face, as ridiculous as it looked in its bleach white, was recognized as a human, but she was not.

One key takeaway from the video is how there is so much below the surface that I have not even scratched yet. In truth we are all ignorant until we know better, but for no one to consider this fault in the bias of the code is telling of our fragmented society. So much of technology is about the "here and now" and instant gratification. We need to not only research and be suspect of the effects of technology on ourselves and our children, but we also need to educate ourselves about the origin of the technology. We need to know where our "instant gratification" is coming from, so we do not replay the injustices of the past. Systemic ignorance is the worst kind of ignorance because it requires an uphill battle against the "system." Joy Buolamwini bravely fights the system to make everyone aware of the injustice beneath the surface of artificial intelligence.

Power to Heal and to Harm

The second takeaway from the video was that AI has the power to heal and to harm. Joy Buolamwini's intentions were always pure. She started her project to create a mirror of

affirmation to celebrate one's life and inspire us to be our best selves. With good intentions, Buolamwini created a sophisticated code to develop her project. She never considered that there could be a problem with artificial intelligence. She had assumed it was a flaw in her research, so she studied, researched, and experimented until all doubt in her work was extinguished. After all her toil, Buolamwini made the dismal discovery of bias written in the very code of what she was trying to use for good. If Joy Buolamwini had been white, would this fact be revealed and this discussion being had?

Diversity and Communication

The NASPAA A (Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration) framework's core competency "Diversity and Communication" reflects the goal of the public administrator to "Communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry." The two-way street of communication requires an interactive discussion. Parties need to mutually respect each other to allow productive and diversified conversations and outcomes. The research that evolved in Buolamwini's project reveals a major barrier of productive, diverse communication: the core of the algorithm or paradigm that we are working with is limited at best and rotten at its worst. Communication cannot be diverse if the only language in the algorithm is that of the dominant race. So many before Buolamwini reasonably had assumed that artificial intelligence could not be biased. Average users of artificial intelligence do not question whether AI is racist; rather, they assume AI to be objective, robotic, and predictable. Most AI users think AI may lack personality, but at least it is fair and unbiased, right? Buolamwini proves to us the opposite is true.

Buolamwini's journey has been remarkable. Earlier this year, she published her widely acclaimed book *Unmasking AI: My Mission to Protect What Is Human in a World of Machines*,

which was a culmination of research, experience, and advocacy (Duke Sanford School of Public Policy, 2025). In April 2025, the director of *Coded Bias*, Shalini Kantayya, hosted a virtual public talk at the University of Kansas entitled “Coded Bias: How Human Prejudice Creates Corrupt Technology” (University of Kansas, 2025). The virtual talk raised awareness and engaged students, policymakers, and the broader public of how racist algorithms plague artificial intelligence. The talk also discussed how to address the systemic bias built into technology. Both Buolamwini and Kantayya act in accordance with the core competency diversity and communication.

Conclusion

Moreover, the means cannot justify the ends. Nor can the ends justify the means. AI is both a godsend and a devil’s torch. How, who, why, when and what are going to be questions that we ask ourselves more and more as AI technology evolves. Clearly, the foundational level of artificial intelligence has not served all; it only served those with fair complexions. Since the coded bias was unearthed in this documentary, Buolamwini has expanded her vision, mission, and research to include advocacy as well as affirmation.

When viewing this documentary through the lenses of public administration, the core competency at the forefront is Diversity and Communication. Public administrators must realize that technological tools such as artificial intelligence must be evaluated to identify who they do or do not serve. They must ensure equity is achieved for all populations. Like Buolamwini, public administrators need to be one step ahead of technology, especially in the realm of artificial intelligence. With so many companies and agencies relying on AI chatbots to address consumer concerns, for example, technology influences the way information is disseminated and digested by the public.

References

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