# Political shifts reshape diversity and inclusion efforts in AI development



CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — As technology companies navigate shifting political landscapes in the United States, there is growing scrutiny on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within artificial intelligence (AI) development, particularly regarding how AI products serve people of colour around the world.

The House Judiciary Committee recently issued subpoenas to Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft, OpenAI, and other leading tech firms, investigating past initiatives aimed at reducing bias and promoting fairness in AI systems. This move reflects a broader political recalibration, with "woke AI" emerging as a contentious issue within the White House and a Republican-led Congress, replacing earlier concerns about harmful algorithmic discrimination.

The U.S. Commerce Department’s standard-setting branch illustrates this shift by removing references to AI fairness, safety, and “responsible AI” in its calls for research collaboration. Instead, the focus now emphasises reducing “ideological bias” to foster “human flourishing and economic competitiveness,” according to an internal document obtained by The Associated Press.

Sociologist Ellis Monk, a scholar specialising in colourism, was approached by Google several years ago to improve the inclusivity of its AI image recognition technologies. Monk explained that earlier computer vision technologies had perpetuated biases by portraying Black and brown people in unflattering ways. He said, “Black people or darker skinned people would come in the picture and we’d look ridiculous sometimes.” To address this, Google adopted Monk’s skin tone scale, developed to better represent the diversity of human skin tones, moving away from a decades-old standard originally created for white dermatology patients. “Consumers definitely had a huge positive response to the changes,” Monk noted.

Despite the skin tone scale’s integration into products across Google and other platforms—including camera phones, video games, and AI image generators—Monk and others express concern that current political pressures may suppress future funding and initiatives focused on making AI technologies more inclusive. Monk observed, “Google wants their products to work for everybody, in India, China, Africa, et cetera. That part is kind of DEI-immune. But could future funding for those kinds of projects be lowered? Absolutely, when the political mood shifts and when there’s a lot of pressure to get to market very quickly.”

Since the Trump administration, hundreds of grants related to science, technology, and health equity themes have been cut, though the direct influence on commercial AI chatbot development and similar applications is less clear. Republican Representative Jim Jordan, chair of the House Judiciary Committee, has stated he intends to examine whether the Biden administration coerced or colluded with AI companies to censor lawful speech. Meanwhile, Michael Kratsios, former director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, criticised Biden-era AI policies for fostering “social divisions and redistribution in the name of equity” during a Texas event this month.

The concern over bias in AI systems has an extensive background. Research revealed that self-driving car technologies struggle to detect pedestrians with darker skin tones, raising safety risks. Studies have shown that AI text-to-image generators overwhelmingly produce images of white men when asked to depict surgeons, misrepresenting demographic realities. Facial recognition software has exhibited higher error rates with Asian faces, and misidentifications by law enforcement tools have led to wrongful arrests of Black men. Notably, Google’s Moments photo app infamously mislabelled images of Black individuals as “gorillas” a decade ago. Even government scientists from the Trump administration acknowledged in 2019 that facial recognition systems performed unevenly based on race, gender, and age.

The 2022 launch of OpenAI’s ChatGPT intensified commercial interest in AI but also pressured companies like Google to accelerate product rollouts. Google's Gemini AI chatbot experienced a particularly problematic launch last year, drawing political ire as conservatives seized upon biases in its image generation features. While Google implemented technical safeguards aimed at addressing disparities, the system was criticised for overcorrecting by generating historical inaccuracies, such as depicting George Washington and World War I American soldiers as people of colour, which led to public apologies and temporary suspension of features.

Vice President JD Vance referenced this controversy during an AI summit in Paris in February, condemning what he described as “downright ahistorical social agendas through AI” and asserting the need to prevent ideological bias in AI development. “We have to remember the lessons from that ridiculous moment,” Vance said. “And what we take from it is that the Trump administration will ensure that AI systems developed in America are free from ideological bias and never restrict our citizens’ right to free speech.”

Former Biden science adviser Alondra Nelson, who helped author principles to protect civil rights and liberties in AI, offered a different perspective. She suggested that recent Republican focus on “ideological bias” in AI parallels earlier concerns about algorithmic bias affecting areas like housing, mortgages, and healthcare. Nelson said, “Fundamentally, to say that AI systems are ideologically biased is to say that you identify, recognise and are concerned about the problem of algorithmic bias, which is the problem that many of us have been worried about for a long time.” Nevertheless, she expressed scepticism about the prospects for bipartisan collaboration under the current political climate: “I think in this political space, unfortunately, that is quite unlikely.”

As the debate over equity in AI intensifies, industry experts, researchers, and policymakers continue to navigate complex questions about technology, bias, and the role political priorities play in shaping the AI landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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