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Software engineer Tracy Chou, a prominent advocate for more diversity in tech, recalls when she realized that an industry so data driven had none on the number of women in the workforce. A founding advisor to Project Include, Chou recounts how the open database she created in 2013 gave her peers a simple way to address a problem that seemed too large to do anything about individually.

Transcript

In 2013, as Tina mentioned, I wrote a medium post calling out the technology industry about it's lack of data about diversity.. And the origin of this was that I'd gone to the Grace Hopper conference, which is the big conference every year.. Annual celebration of women in computing.. Now, it's over 10 thousand people that go.. Back then it was a little bit smaller.. And I'd heard Cheryl Sandberg talking about how dire the situation was for women in technology, how the numbers were dropping precipitously.. And I just realized that there weren't any numbers.. And it was so ironic that bring in an industry that's so data driven, that we didn't have data on diversity.. As an engineer I'd had to build out AB testing frameworks, I'd instrument every product launch I'd done.. We poured over the metrics, all these dashboards..

It was because we cared about those things, and we wanted to optimize them.. But the fact that there was no data on diversity signaled to me that we were trying to hide the problem or minimize it.. And we weren't actually serious about solving it.. And so this medium post I wrote was just a call, it was a question, there was a call to action.. And I didn't really expect anybody to respond to it.. So surprisingly a lot of people followed up and sent their numbers on women in engineering.. I still run this repository and people still submit their data.. But some of the key learnings there were to me that people actually did care, and just didn't know what to do.. But giving them very concrete action item, which was count up your number of women in engineering, count up your total number of engineers, and submit that someplace so we can start building up a benchmark.. The very easy concrete action, people were very happy to take it..

They just didn't know what to do before.. And that ended up kick-starting that whole wave of disclosures were Google followed up in May of 2014, Facebook, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Apple, all these companies are now in the pattern of releasing annual diversity data reports, which is pretty cool.. Unfortunately the numbers have not been very good in the last 5 Years.. So now, often times people will ask me, "So great you did this thing in 2013, where are we in 2018? "How much has happened in the last 5 years?" And the sad thing is, there hasn't been a ton of progress.. There's very slow progress in the numbers, the percentages of women in engineering.. A lot of VC firms have, in the past year, hired their first female partners.. There's a little bit of progress there.. There's been some backsliding on racial diversity.. So this nonprofit Ascend has done some analysis of this and seen that while White women in leadership has increased their percentages, every other ethnicity has lost ground in leadership.. So, we're backsliding there..

There's a lot of talk about diversity and it's getting more nuanced, but hasn't got much beyond that.. Some of the things that are nice to see in the discussion of diversity is that we are starting to talk about diversity as more than just gender, and more than just White women, for example.. We're talking about diversity and inclusion, no longer just diversity.. But thinking about once you have different people in the room, do you actually incorporate everyone's opinions and allow everyone the same chances to succeed? We started to advance some of our terminology around things like gas lighting, which I didn't realize was happening to me.. But, this idea of making people feel like they're crazy, and feel like things are in their head when they talk about these issues.. When I first started talking about being female in tech and maybe having a different experience, and the men around me, I was told that there was no sexism.. And just because I believe there was sexism, I was projecting it around me.. Now I know that there's a term for this, which is gas-lighting.. And it's good that we're starting to advance some of the vocabulary to identify with things and make progress around them.. Some other things that have happened in the last few years has more of a spotlight on VC, the Venture Capitalists, and not just on the tech companies, which is good..

They're a very important part of the ecosystem.. VC's are the ones that decide whose start-up ideas even get a chance to try to make it.. But unfortunately, I think some of what's happened..