URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/measure-the-downsides/

Responsible Innovation Labs executive director Jon Zieger observes that, when startups create problematic incentives early on, those incentives can take over and become nearly impossible to change. He suggests that by measuring the potential downsides of new technologies when they first emerge, technology companies may be better equipped to change problematic incentives before they become integral to the business.

Transcript

   - I think there's a way in which incentives, 00:00:08,450 and the creation of incentives, you know, sort of takes on this momentum, right.. Early in the life of a company, there's a lot of fluidity, you can change, you know, what are the principle business drivers, et cetera.. But those ossified over time, you begin to build businesses around them, to make certain representations to your investors, whether that's in the private or public markets.. And so those, incentives, begin to drive the, you know, there's a period in which you're driving the incentives, and then there's the time at which they drive you, right.. And one of the things that I have often thought, is that there were ways in which the companies, that are very responsible, for our present information ecosystem, could have changed the outcome, right.. There was a time very early in the life, and I'll use Facebook, but it's certainly not the only example.. When that company could have, chosen not to kind of plant its flag, on the engagement driven, social graph, engagement driven business model, and done something else.. And an example I'll give you here is, I was at a conference that the AP hosted, the associated press hosted in 2008, or maybe it was early 2009, and it was around the question of algorithmic news.. And I actually, the AP's focus, folks who were, you know, sort of, you know, in the industry or thinking about it back then, would remember there's Google news, that was a big issue.. They really focused on Google news, and one of the issues that was coming up at this conference, was sort of, what's the future of news? And sort of these algorithmically generated news sites..

   But one of the issues that was coming up, from academics in particular, was filter bubbles, and the ways in which filter bubbles would create, you know, this sort of cabining off of people, into distinct information spheres.. And it was talked about from people from Google, and Facebook, and others, and the thinking at the time was, well maybe, maybe it's an issue, but people don't get most of their news from the internet, and so they get it, they get it from other places, they get it from the newspaper, they get it from TV, or other places.. And so it's really not a thing, it's really not a thing to worry about, and I've often thought, you know, back to your question of why, why I'm doing this and why, why focus on this particular effort? I have often thought that there was a time, that was a moment, in which somebody could have stood up and said, yeah, we're aware that there's a possible downside here.. There's an externality that is, real, it's serious, people were thinking about, we don't agree.. We maybe don't agree, that it's going to be that big of a problem, but let's do what we in Silicon Valley, and the tech industry do really well, let's put metric on it, let's measure it, let's watch for it, and let's manage it.. Right.. And, and then, in my, you know, my counterfactual, that may or may, you know, we'll never know, maybe you end up in a world, where the current fracturing, of the internet information space, would have been, if not avoided, at least much more aggressively managed, much earlier.. I think, to the manifest benefit of the world...