Twitter Thread by Nando de Freitas



Nando de Freitas
@NandoDF

Another long thread. Bear with me till the end please. These are my views, and not necessarily of those associated with me. Though those associated with me have been incredibly supportive. I thank everyone who messaged me. I thank @databoydg for inspiring me to say this next. 1/n

First, @databoydg: I hope this makes justice to what you've tried to teach me. I'm sorry if I'm a slow student. In this second part of the story, I'm a privileged academic having a drink in Montreal after a #neurips conference with @sindero 2/n

Simon says to me: I feel we need to do something about this (stark lack of minority representation in ML). We agree we'll do something about it, but it feels like we're at the bottom of Everest and have to climb it without any gear 3/n

Time goes by and with the creation of the @turinginst I suggest in the first meeting that we should use it as a public platform to improve the numbers of Black people in UK universities. I encounter a lot of resistance (to be honest, it felt aggressive) and defensiveness 4/n

I was told that was an Oxford and Cambridge problem only by another academic. I felt silenced. Ironically, by both men and women. 5/n

Just earlier that year, I was sitting in a college in Oxford and I overheard three professors in the table next door stating that "she got the job because she's a woman. These days only women get the jobs". I was with my grad students. Put the fork down. 6/n

I was in shock. I wanted to raise my voice and say something to them. I feared they would see me for who I am. I feared that they would just brand me as an angry ... "different" guy. Just like @timnitGebru is now unfairly being branded an angry Black woman. 7/n

Back at the @turinginst it was a woman that most opposed using the creation of the institute as an opportunity for DEI. This puzzled me. I feel all us minorities, whether because of our colour, gender or who we make love to, have sometimes failed to see that we are the same 8/n

We can't be complacent about one another. We need to stand together. I felt very conflicted with going to the @DeepIndaba in Kenya because of their legal stance against LGBT rights. I admire my gay colleagues who put themselves at risk and chose to go there and teach 9/n

I met with @adrian_weller, a wonderful human being, and he began a process of making sure the @turinginst would do the right thing. But the resistance and defensiveness to improving the numbers of Black people in AI continued elsewhere in the academic world 10/n

At the #neurips in Barcelona, I took a picture of @Moustapha_6C the only Black person surrounded by thousands as he gave this talk. I was going to share it in social media, but I didn't. I was afraid. My friend @mgershoff who visited me at that meeting was shocked too. 11/n

So when soon after @shakir_za @ulrichpaquet and @avishkar58 approached me about making this be about Africa and not Black people, I was immediately onboard. I saw that finally people weren't as defensive. And so the @DeepIndaba begun. Then I learned about @black_in_ai 12/n

I couldn't believe that the people of @black_in_ai, including @timnitGebru, had managed to pull it off. How could it have been that easy? How could they have succeed were we had failed and seemingly so easily? In truth, it is now clear it wasn't easy. It was bloody hard 13/n

Because every moment of discrimination I've witnessed pales in comparison to those encountered by my female colleagues and other disadvantaged minorities. It only takes one time for someone to call you the N word for it to scar you for life. We should have known better. 14/n

Fast forward to this week. What happened to @timnitGebru has many layers, and it is for her to tell her story. This is her moment, and I feel bad for having stolen some of it. But one thing is clear, it was an enough is enough moment. This is no time to be complacent anymore 15/n

Just like with the despicable acts leading to the death of George Floyd, this is a moment where my Black and female colleagues among others at Google, NeurIPS and everywhere are saying enough is enough 16/n

And they need to be heard, and they need to speak louder. It is not the time for it to go away. I have stood by @JeffDean and will continue to do so, but please do not interpret it as a sign that I believe it is all fine. No, it is terrible and not the time to go quiet 17/n

@timnitGebru was right to be frustrated. I'm angry too at how slow it can be. I'm angry at how my Canada failed to give visas to the African students, enough is enough 18/n

This might sound biased, but those who know me or know the problem know better. Google has to improve. And Googlers themselves are speaking up, and I'm very proud of them. It's not easy. But the problem goes well beyond Google. It's everywhere in tech and academia 19/n

It is worse in academia because of how sluggish everything is. I witnessed how hard it was for Maria Klawe to create change at UBC and Princeton. The problem is terrible at companies that owe so much to Africa, e.g. AWS and Tencent. It is terrible in every tech company.

But, in my limited experience, some tech companies do try hard to do something about it. I'm certainly proud of my colleagues at @DeepMind working on DEI, education, recruiting and scholarships in particular. It's not easy because society at large is full of prejudice 21/n

As an example, it was terrible for Chinese employees in London this year, specially at the beginning of the pandemic. They faced a lot of offensive rubbish. Whenever I volunteered to speak at schools, parents would tell me they never thought CS could be for their girl. 22/n

In short, this is not the time to be quiet. All should hear the voices of people like @timnitGebru loud and clear. It is time for us all in AI, in all tech companies and academia, to stand together and maybe even walk out all together to raise awareness and create a better future