Looking at Technology with a Critical Eye: Social Work Researchers Collaborate to Increase Equity and Decrease Built-in Bias

By Jean Sage

W e’ve all heard the hype about technology over the decades and its powerful potential to do good. But by now we know that’s not always true. As technology generators, social workers and social researchers are deeply focused on big data, algorithms (basically a set of rules) machine learning-processes by which we use algorithms learned from data to predict outcomes and performance—and artificial intelligence where social workers practice. The National Association of Social Workers says that social workers face critical decisions about the lives of vulnerable children and youths while working in stressful environments that include high caseloads and workloads, inadequate supervision, safety concerns, and too little time spent with each client. In addition to challenges within technology’s design, there are acknowledged challenges within all areas of social work around the acceptance, adoption, and application of technology in many of the systems in their research. Asst. Prof. Maria Y. Rodriguez and Asst. Prof. Melanie Sage are either using technology or addressing issues of built-in bias affects populations in which they are interested.

Addressing the idea that technology must be integrated into social work education, research and practice,

And, considering that technology was designed specifically to help us do things more quickly and at a larger scale, it can actually perpetuate or increase negative issues that social workers are trying to address.

A few of the most widely accepted technological tools used to drive decision-making of many kinds are big data, algorithms (basically a set of rules) machine learning-processes by which we use algorithms learned from data to predict outcomes and performance—and artificial intelligence. Shown here, left to right: Melissa Santiago, Melissa S. Biletnikoff, Benson Cai (undergraduate student), Asst. Prof. Melanie Sage and Maria Y. Rodriguez, and then the Graduate School of Education 2021 student Shaila Chakravarty. (Chakravarty lost her job for failing to innate in its use.)

Asst. Prof. Melanie Sage added, “There are children and youth” with almost any other population with whom social workers are engaged, i.e., veterans, people with mental illness, and the elderly in general, to name just a few.

Sage noted, “I’ve always been interested in technology, and it’s grown over the years, and in my position, I realized ways that technology slowly in social work. In the way, one or two social worker can potentially have a big impact.” For those reasons, and as technology becomes even more prevalent, it makes sense for social workers to have some knowledge of technologies applications as well as their challenges and potential dangers.

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What drove you to become a teacher and researcher? What drove you to employ explosives; 180 people died and almost 700 were seriously ill who were nearing life’s end. I believe in my work and want to be a model of facing aging and end-of-life issues all the time. I had a three-year plan. I returned to the faculty and my research. I had dreamed of starting a micro-credential program on the topic of aging, which is now in its third year. I wanted to be able to write strong, look back and say that I had finished something that was important to me. I believe in my work and want to be a model of considered aging.

I had a bulldozer moment before becoming a teacher and researcher. What drove you to do what you’ve called your “dream job”? DW: As a social work student, I learned best from professors who had been in practice, who knew what it was like to be with people in their vulnerable moments. And as a healthcare social worker, I learned about the need to improve the way we cared for people with serious illnesses who were nearing life’s end. I realized that I wanted to make a difference in the lives of my patients. Then, in 1992, I was working in an Oklahoma City, Oklahoma-based hospital where a major building was burned down. A demonic torrent set off a fire filled with explosives. 60 people died and about 700 were injured. The hospital worked at the majority of the casualties, and I saw more loss and devastation than I’d ever imagined. That made me realize that I needed to follow my dream of becoming a professor and researcher—it wasn’t going to fall in my lap.

What was the transition like? DW: I entered a PhD program the next fall. I lived and went from writing chart notes to papers and a dissertation. It was an abrupt transition and I wanted to quit after the first semester, but I had a nine-year-old and teenager and didn’t want them to see me quit anything.

And the “dream job” part? DW: I wanted to be a social work professor to help prepare the next generation of social workers for work with people who are actually in the midst of death. And I have found that satisfaction; it is incredibly meaningful to have been a part of my students’ careers, to know the impact that having mentors who are invested in your outcomes and well-being can have built-in bias.

Looking at Technology with a Critical Eye:

Addressing the idea that technology can have built-in bias.

“...and other technology can potentially hold us back from innovation; that’s why it is so important for our disciplines to have faculty of color,” Dr. Deborah Waldrop said.

“...So, the question of whether technology is biased is really not the most important one. The most important question is: ‘Who gets to decide on what the norms are for this technology? Who is using it? Who is benefiting from it? Who is not?’”

For more alumni and student praise for Deborah Waldrop, visit www.socialwork.buffalo.edu

PROFESSOR DEBORAH WALDROP

RETIRIES

Prof. Deborah Waldrop has been with the School of Social Work since 1992. As Waldrop looks to retirement, she spoke about her research focus (aging, and of life care and decision-making), her experiences and her future.
Welcome to this issue of Mosaics. In these still-challenging times, one bright spot you can see being a benefit of your own health and well-being. With the state of social and global challenges we face, it’s important to continue to acknowledge triumphs and growth.

This issue of Mosaics highlights some of the good work that our faculty and alumni are doing; we look at Prof. Sage. Israel’s work providing virtually to underepresented students, helping to support and recognize these efforts, and shape a better future. As long-time Prof. Deborah Webber prepares to retire, we reflect on the time she has come to social work education and research on inspiring ones. And hope continues to inspire us to believe that the field of a geographic-social work will continue to have an impact in years to come.

Active alumnus donor Jacqueline McGarity, PhD, ’18, is also changing lives in a powerful way that we can to him, specifically for his work developing new tools, and giving them to others. As part of this work, he is also an active advocate for social work, giving people with personal, intellectual and development disabilities a voice in advocacy efforts. Our main story discusses both the potential and possible pitfalls of the general idea of “technology,” and how this intersects with social work research and practice. As we reflect on the question of norms, and defines what active listening is, and how this relates to social work practice, a part of the story is how to make technology more inclusive and responsive for the needs of transgender populations. Given the state of the world, we feel compelled to offer you, our alumni, friends and community, our reflections on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and other challenges to peaceful coexistence.

Concerning the war activity and the displacement of populations we are seeing directly, our compassion is for the many innocent people caught in the tragedy. It’s more than difficult to see human suffering unabated on those who did nothing to warrant attack or persecution amid the situation of our humanitarian crisis. We are witnessing the strain that cannot be unimagined and is witness to. The oppression often masked behind the scenes, and often the result of these events, is still a reality, and it is important to continue to support systems that promote peace and justice for all.

Although located half a world away, they are still our neighbors—connected economically, socially and from a humanitarian standpoint. In our own country, the quest for social and racial justice persists. Gun violence impacts the lives of many innocent people who are killed, wounded, or left with the loss of a loved one. Restrictions on basic human rights are gaining momentum, with less targeting vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQ+ community and others already at risk from societal pressure.

These realities can seem insurmountable in many ways, and you might ask how we can possibly maintain our equilibrium in the face of such mechanistic attempts to be socially dedicated to honoring the implicit dignity, rights, and capacities of those individuals, families, and communities. We know the aforementioned to be our social work professional values—and our adherence to them goes without saying. But to be effective, we must care for our own mental and physical health and seek support from those who can help. If necessary, as our own Social Student Academy has encouraged, decompression from stressful and unproductive conversations will help you process. Reflect on your own times, and reflect on your own social work colleagues.

Caring for oneself is not a cliché, given that social workers must always be ready to serve others. We must engage in self-care so that we can continue to embrace group-care or so to which we devote time and support and uplift each other. We are living in trying times and we must acknowledge that we are surrounded by various forms of trauma culture and social stress. On春节和新年, we support each other in ways that are considered with our value base. And above emphasizes our existing strengths. Essentially, the advice we give to others, we must incorporate in our own daily work.

We hope you enjoy this publication; thank you for continuing to be a valued part of our school community.

In compassion and solidarity,

Joseph A. Israel, PhD, ACSW
Dean and Professor
Rodriguez has a lifelong interest in coding, and her graduate work naturally led her to data science (at the University of Washington in Seattle), a technology that intersects with the work she does as a social worker. "Data is a tool of transformation," she says. "I'm interested in understanding social policy through the lens of social science, and data science—analysis and visualization—has been a useful tool in this pursuit."

"Social work is about using data to help people, and it's also about understanding how to use data to inform policy," says Rodriguez. "We're using data to tell stories, and we're using those stories to inform our practice."

Rodriguez has worked as a data scientist for several organizations, including the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare and the Social Science Research Council. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Washington, where she teaches courses in data science and social work. She also serves as the director of the University of Washington's Center for Social Science Data, which collects and curates social science data from around the world.

"I am passionate about using data to inform social work practice," says Rodriguez. "I believe that data can help us understand the complex issues that social workers face, and that it can help us to make better decisions about how to respond to those issues."

Rodriguez is also an advocate for the use of data in social work education. "I believe that social work students should be taught how to use data in their practice," she says. "I think that this is a critical skill for the 21st century social work professional."
Given the state of the world, I feel compelled to offer you, her impressive, numerous contributions to the field of social work. I am very inspired by her work as a social worker and an advocate who has dedicated her life to serving underrepresented students, helping to support and navigate racial minority students, and connecting with racially underrepresented groups such as the LGBTQ+ community and those who are faced with the loss of a loved one. Restrictions on basic human needs and services are making change more difficult than ever.

"My work is focused on child welfare, " says Dr. Melanie Thoma, associate professor in UB’s Department of Social Work Science. "It’s a great honor to be a social worker because it’s a way to help people every day."

"Social work cannot be separated from social justice, " says Dr. Noelle St. Vil, associate professor in UB’s Department of Social Work Science. "As a social worker, I am committed to ensuring that all communities have access to care and support. I believe that social work is about making the world a better place for everyone."

Dr. Noelle St. Vil's work connecting with racially underrepresented students, helping to support and navigate racial minority students, and connecting with racially underrepresented groups such as the LGBTQ+ community and those who are faced with the loss of a loved one. Restrictions on basic human needs and services are making change more difficult than ever.

"I'm interested in understanding how technology affects our society and our world, " says Dr. Noelle St. Vil. "We need to understand how technology can be used to determine predictive risk and how technology can be used to determine accurate predictions."

"As a computer person, what's most important is that we think about society at large. " says Dr. Atri Rudra, UB DEPT. OF Computer Sciences. "We need to think about the ethical and effective use of technology in human services (and is a co-chair of the American Academy of Social Work Ethics and Technology)."

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Deborah Waldrop:

MOSAICS:

For more alumni and student praise for Deborah Waldrop, see profile p. 5.

A New Role to Support Racially Underrepresented Students

Ant Prof Nolte, UB School of Social Work (SSW) for women and minority researchers. Finding Black youth, families, and individuals who are overlooked by others, she said, will always be a goal in her career.

The story of life is often told by the pain and suffering experienced in our lives. When I was a child, my family experienced a trauma, and it was a time of uncertainty and fear. I remember feeling alone and vulnerable, and I knew I would need help.

As a healthcare social worker, I learned about the importance of connecting with people in their vulnerable moments. I was fortunate to have professors who had been in practice, who knew what it was like to be with people in those moments. I wanted to be a part of my students' careers, like my professors were important to me. If you were me—and have done what I have done—and didn't want them to see me quit anything.

When I was a child, I dreamed of going to college. I remember feeling nervous and unsure, but I knew I had to keep going. I worked hard and was able to graduate from college, and I'm proud of myself for that. I've always believed in the power of education and I'm grateful that I was able to pursue my dreams.

I was also bitten by the bug to do research and become a social work professor. And as a healthcare social worker, I learned about the importance of facing aging and end-of-life issues all the time.

I have that satisfaction; it is incredibly meaningful to prepare the next generation of social workers for work in aging, end of life care and decision-making, and others. I was also bitten by the bug to do research and become a social work professor. And as a healthcare social worker, I learned about the importance of facing aging and end-of-life issues all the time.

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