

MOSAICS

Spring 2022

Looking at Technology with a Critical Eye:

Social Work Researchers Collaborate to Increase Equity and Decrease Built-in Bias

By Jana Eisenberg

We've all heard the hype about technology over the decades and its powerful potential to fix ... well, everything. But by now we know that's not always true. And technology's got issues. Several UBSSW researchers are deeply focused on looking at technology, especially how it can have built-in bias.

(AI), which is machine learning (and other methods) applied to tasks usually accomplished by humans.

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 how it (including social media) affects populations in which they are interested.

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



UB social work faculty/researchers are collaborating with their counterparts and students in UB's Department of Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) to consider alternate ways to address, design and apply technology to better serve the broader population, especially around increasing equity and reducing bias. Shown here, left to right, are Al-Kesna Foster (CSE undergraduate student), CSE Asst. Prof. Kenny Joseph, UBSSW's Asst. Profs. Melanie Sage and Maria Y. Rodriguez, Ahana Bhattacharya, Benson Cai (CSE undergraduate students), and CSE PhD student Yuhao Du. (Not shown, but quoted in the story, is CSE Prof. Atri Rudra.)

And, considering that technology was designed specifically to help 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 vaunted technological tools used to drive decision-making of many kinds are big data, algorithms (basically a set of steps), machine learning—a process by which an algorithm learns from its analyses and adjusts, self-optimizing its 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 **limited training and resources (for example, access to emerging technology).**” (Emphasis added.) Replace “children and youths” with almost any other population with whom social workers are engaged, i.e., veterans, people with mental illness, and the story is generally the same.

Sage noted, “I’ve always been interested in technology, and as I grew in my field and in my position, I realized ways that technology illiteracy in social work holds us back from innovation; that not knowing the effects of algorithms and other technology can potentially cause harm.”

For those reasons, and as technology becomes even more prevalent, it makes sense for social workers to have some knowledge of technology's application, issues and potential in their field, as well as its challenges and potential dangers.

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DEBORAH WALDROP RETIRES

Prof. Deborah Waldrop has been with the School of Social Work since 1999. As Waldrop looks to retirement, she spoke about her research focus (aging, end of life care and decision-making), her experience and her future.



MOSAICS: *Why retire now?*

Deborah Waldrop: It's time. After my term serving as associate dean for faculty development ended in 2019, 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 serious illness, which is now in its third year. I wanted to be able to leave strong, look back and say that I had finished some things that were important to me. If you were me—and have done the work I've done—you must practice what you have studied, written and taught about. I talk to people about facing aging and end-of-life issues all the time. I believe in my work and want to be a model of considered aging.

MOSAICS: *You had a long practical career before becoming a teacher and researcher. What drove you to 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 illness who were nearing life's end. I always had entering a doctoral program in the back of my mind. Then, in 1995 I was working in Oklahoma City, four blocks from where a federal building was bombed. (Note: A domestic terrorist set off a van filled with explosives; 180 people died and almost 700 were injured.) The hospital I worked at took 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.

MOSAICS: *What was the transition like?*

DW: I entered a PhD program the next fall. I was 40 and went from writing chart notes to papers and a dissertation. It was a difficult transition and I wanted to quit every semester, but I had a pre-teen and teenager and didn't want them to see me quit anything.

MOSAICS: *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 seriously ill and facing death. And I have that satisfaction; it is incredibly meaningful to have been a part of my students' careers, like my former graduate assistant and mentee, Jackie McGinley (see profile p. 5), and others. I was also bitten by the research bug; and found out I could make a difference by creating and disseminating knowledge. I feel fortunate that I landed here, it's been a wonderful ride, and it is bittersweet to be leaving.

MOSAICS: *What are your plans?*

DW: I want to travel and spend time with my grandchildren. I'm retiring from UB but not from life. I am drawn back to service, and I eagerly look forward to learning what's next for me.

I will be forever thankful that I had the opportunity to learn from Dr. Waldrop. Her passion for teaching and learning from her students is unlike any other. I will never forget her kindness and respect towards her students; she called us her "colleagues" in our final class. Thank you, Dr. Waldrop, for being the teacher, social worker, researcher, and person that you are. You have truly made a difference in my life."

— Corinne Fiegl, MSW '20

For more alumni and student praise for Deborah Waldrop, visit <https://tinyurl.com/deborah-waldrop>.

DEAN'S COLUMN: *Caring For Ourselves and Others in Trying Times*

Welcome to this issue of Mosaics. In these still-challenging times, I first hope that you are all being mindful of your own health and well-being. With the slate of societal and global challenges we face, it's important to continue to acknowledge triumphs and grace.

This issue of Mosaics highlights some of the good work that our faculty and alumni are doing; we look at Asst. Prof. Noelle St. Vil's work connecting with racially underrepresented students, helping to support and navigate their journeys with respect and dignity.

As long-time Prof. Deborah Waldrop prepares to retire, we bid her farewell. The story of how she came to social work education and research is an inspiring one. And her impressive, numerous contributions to the field of gerontological social work will continue to have an impact in years to come.

Active alumni donor Jaqueline McGinley, PhD '18, is also inspiring; now a professor in her own right, she is committed to both educating future social workers, and giving them an incentive to consider the area of social work that is her passion: working with people around intellectual and developmental disabilities and end-of-life care.

Our main story discusses both the potential and possible pitfalls of the general idea of "technology" within social work and for social workers and social work researchers. The discussion illustrates how we must continue to question norms. And, it turns out that active listening, a core competency in social work practice, is a part of digging into how to make technology more inclusive and responsive for the needs of a broader range of people.

Given the state of the world, I feel compelled to offer you, our alumni, friends and community, my reflections on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and other challenges to peaceful existence.

Concerning the war activity and the dislocation of populations we are seeing abroad, my compassion is for the many innocent people caught up in tragedy. It's more than difficult to see heinous aggression unleashed on those who did nothing to warrant attack or persecution—it's a violation of our humanitarian calling. We are witnessing the atrocity of an unprovoked war in Ukraine, the oppression of the Kurdish people and so much more.

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 continues. Gun violence impacts

the lives of many innocent people who are killed, wounded, or faced with the loss of a loved one. Restrictions on basic human rights are gaining momentum, with laws 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 trauma? As social workers, we are dedicated to honoring the inherent dignity, rights and strengths of all 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 Graduate Student Association has encouraged, disengage from social media and unproductive conversations if they cause you stress. Reach out to loved ones, friends, and 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—in which we literally check in with one another to lend support and uplift each other.

We are living in trying times and we must acknowledge this certainty. We are surrounded by various forms of trauma at home and abroad. It is important for us to support each other in ways that are consistent with our value base. And always emphasize our existing strengths. Essentially, the advice we give to others, we must incorporate in our own daily walk.

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

In camaraderie and solidarity,



Keith A. Alford, PhD, ACSW
Dean and Professor



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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 hotbed). She is currently looking at social media dis- and misinformation, particularly for women of color. (In grad school, she analyzed House of Representatives Housing Subcommittee hearing recordings; she's also been a community organizer.)

"To be of service is my primary reason for being an academic," said Rodriguez. "Specifically to aid communities that have been on the short end of the stick. One of my projects is working on building a bot to use across social media platforms to help communities of color not to have to defend their existence."

Sage and Rodriguez both work in collaboration with members of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, where Rodriguez also serves as an adjunct faculty member; she's active in interdisciplinary advocacy and collaboration. She is a faculty associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, a member of Twitter's Academic Research Advisory Board, and a faculty fellow at the Center for Democracy and Technology.

Sage is a national leader at the intersection of technology and social work, providing training for social work practitioners and educators in the ethical and effective use of technology and social media. Among other roles, she serves on the Technology Advisory Committee for Council on Social Work Education, and is chair of husiTa (a national non-profit that promotes the ethical and effective use of technology in human services) and is a co-chair of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare Grand Challenge, Harnessing Technology for Social Good.

"My work is focused on child welfare," said Sage. "It's one of social work's oldest professions and can be slow to innovate. But recent federal changes, emerging technology, a desire for efficiency, and demands to improve services are making change more imperative. My first major project is an NSF- and Amazon-funded grant to think about fair use of algorithms in child welfare."

"Most of the algorithms that are already being used to determine predictive risk when deciding what services might lead to the best outcomes are based on

historical records, which can be biased," said Sage. "This project is trying to address the fairness and equity component; to help the field understand how using machine learning to predict who gets what can increase bias." Her work with Computer Sciences faculty includes consulting with child welfare agencies about the best use of data to guide future services.

The other part of Sage's work is around use of social media for youth aging out of the child welfare system. "Youth in care have many relational losses, including family, bumping from home to home—they often don't have ongoing supportive relationships. And, we know that youths who can maintain supportive relationships when they leave care are less likely to experience serious negative outcomes," said Sage. "Child welfare agencies see social media as risky, but those most at risk also have the most to gain—it may give them a way to stay connected and supported. One key to better outcomes is learning how to use social media in healthy ways that minimize risks." (*For comments from Dean Alford on this topic, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/smartphones-child-welfare>*)

"As a computer person, what's great about working with Maria and Melanie is talking about how to think about society at large."

**Prof. Atri Rudra, UB DEPT. OF
COMPUTER SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING**

Rodriguez iterates that historically or culturally faulty data can drive existing disparity levels even deeper. "An algorithm can only do what its programmer tells it," she said. "And most programmers were trained by society to think about certain things as more (or less) important. So if you think about categories of people—Black and brown, trans, immigrants—who are marginalized...they are considered by definition 'at the margins,' i.e., 'less important.'"

One of her major projects is looking at social media data; using text/words as data to gather unsolicited personal narratives of those who identify as on society's margins. "This came from my wondering how people talked about how to navigate systems, and how futile



they felt in those systems, given their positionalities," said Rodriguez, noting that she's one of the few in social work research using social media this way.

She is also speaking with women of color political candidates to consider using the data gathered to inform policy. "I hope to turn these insights into recommendations, not just for platforms, but to extend 'social citizenship' for those traditionally marginalized people," she said.

Computer Science and Engineering faculty members Prof. Atri Rudra and Asst. Prof. Kenneth Joseph, who are both also members of UB's Computing for Social Good group, agree that making technology work better for everyone is crucial.

"Big data, machine learning, and AI cannot solve the world's problems," said Rudra. "As a computer person, what's great about working with Maria and Melanie is talking about how to think about society at large. Instead of saying 'I have a solution,' social workers talk to people; they try to figure out what will work. That's a shift in mindset for people like us. How do you collect data about humans—and use that data to make decisions about humans? Where are the pitfalls?"

Joseph agrees. "My work is at the intersection of computer science and sociology; still, I hadn't really understood social work's applied nature, especially through the practical social justice lens Melanie and Maria have," he said. "That's reorienting my thinking—the nature of my research was to see if we could use computing as a tool for social science; should these tools make decisions or suggestions? That was a core question. Now I'm thinking more about using these tools to combat or decrease human biases and biased decisions."

The work to approach such a large topic is ongoing, and the questions complex. Former dean, Prof. Nancy J. Smyth also acknowledges that caution is required, both in determining what mode of

Why I Give

UBSSW ALUM/DONOR PROFILE:

Jacqueline McGinley PhD '18

By Jana Eisenberg



technology is employed, and how (and who) is creating the technology. Smyth is coauthor, along with Sage, and Laurel Iverson Hitchcock of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, of "Teaching Social Work With Digital Technology" (Council on Social Work Education, 2019).

"'Technology' in concept is neutral—but once someone starts to create something, it's no longer neutral," said Smyth. "People have assumptions and beliefs. That's why social work educators, researchers, and practitioners need to be literate, and ask critical questions. What is the technology tool? Who created it? What is it being used for? If data is being presented and used, where did it come from—are there protections in place?"

One of Rodriguez's colleagues at the Berkman Klein Center is Prof. Desmond Patton of the Columbia School of Social Work, where he's also associate dean for innovation and academic affairs, and co-director of its Justice, Equity and Technology lab.

"Social work scientists and social workers need to understand technology as a tool, and we need to have the right tool," said Patton. "Tools can have harmful effects when not adjusted to anticipate the needs of and concerns from a diverse population."

As far as social workers being able to make contributions in technology, Patton said, "They can. We need to apply 'social work thinking,' based on the NASW code of ethics. Once we understand problems' root causes, consider the humanity of every person and reflect on those issues, we can think about how to sow in things like algorithmic design and machine learning."

Someone like Rodriguez, a social work researcher with computer science and coding skills, can create "a space and place for others to work with her," continued Patton. "She can help others understand the language and the data—what's going into it? What's not in it? Where is it coming from?"

Once again attesting that the field of social work must think about, use, be part of creating, and acknowledge technology, Patton said, "We cannot be social workers in the 21st century without a baseline of understanding of how technology affects our society and our world." •

It started with around \$5, and "wanting to help.

While at UBSSW, Jacqueline McGinley, PhD '18, responded to an appeal from the school's Division of University Advancement (formerly Division of Philanthropy and Alumni Engagement); it inspired an unexpected journey of meaningful giving.

"The appeal, about the Students Helping Students Fund, said something like, 'Would you give part of your weekly coffee money to this fund?', said McGinley, now an assistant professor in Binghamton University's Department of Social Work. "I do drink a lot of coffee, so that resonated. Also, I decided to give to help students, who I consider colleagues—students set up this fund for students; it's used for emergencies, like airfare to attend a family funeral, or help with tuition or books.

McGinley earned her bachelor's at Elmira College, and her MSW at Rutgers; she selected UB for her PhD after researching the region's options.

"UBSSW stood out as a top-tier school with innovative thinking around things like trauma-informed care and technology use," she said. "The exceptional mentorship impressed me—Dr. Deborah Waldrop inspired me as a researcher scholar. I still carry the peer mentorship I shared with my cohort, and I also forged a professional and ongoing bond with then-Dean Nancy Smyth.

McGinley's began giving annually, while progressing in her career, realizing that she wanted to have a more specific impact. Her giving now reflects her research and teaching interests, which include intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), end-of-life care and bereavement, and gerontological, organizational, and community social work.

As a practitioner, I worked with people with developmental disabilities, and discovered that there were few social workers in the field," she said. "As I moved into researching and teaching, I realized a disconnect between social work students and their awareness

of this rewarding and fertile career possibility.

After talking with the Advancement office, she founded an award to recognize a student working in the field. The goal was to give them an incentive to continue in it, post-graduation. That award was established in 2016, and it led to the next step in McGinley's giving journey.

In attendance at the inaugural award presentation was SSW research professor emeritus, Dr. Tom Nochajski. Inspired by McGinley's award, and in honor of his late wife, he decided to endow the award. "The Susan Nochajski and Jacqueline McGinley Excellence in Disability Practice Award" acknowledges Dr. Susan Nochajski, a clinical associate professor in UB's Department of Rehabilitation Science and director of the Occupational Therapy Program; she dedicated her life to working primarily with persons with IDD.

But McGinley wanted to push further. Now, she has created the Intellectual and Developmental Disability Experiential Learning Fund, actively encouraging recipients to consider the field. She emphasizes that even smaller gifts can be impactful.

"My annual giving ranges between \$500 to \$2,500," she said. "I may not be able to make a larger gift, or endow the award, but I can bring my ideas to the Advancement folks—they want to work with people to help realize their giving goals. I do hope that by the end of my career, my research will make a difference in my field—but that generally takes years. There's something about this funding that feels more immediate—every year, I can see students exploring and becoming committed to the field.

What's important in YOUR giving?

To learn more about making a meaningful, customized gift of any size to the school (yes, even \$5!), contact Laura Dawidowicz at lauradaw@buffalo.edu or at 716-829-3737.

The profile has been edited for length; for the full version, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/jackie-mcginley>.

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A New Role to Support Racially Underrepresented Students



Asst. Prof. Noelle St. Vil has been at UBSSW for seven years; her research focuses on Black male-female relationships, and she is a dedicated educator. And, starting in

the spring of 2021, she accepted an additional, newly created role within the school: faculty support liaison for racially underrepresented students.

When approached about the role, she jumped at the opportunity. "I'm passionate about supporting students and doing anything to help them survive, thrive and graduate," said St. Vil. "It was already informally a major part of what I do here, so I was glad to have the opportunity to formalize it." The position is listed as a node within the school's recently established Racial Justice Network.

She started by emailing all the racially underrepresented students to let them know she was available in this new role; in addition to offering support via one-on-one meetings and drop-in group

discussions, she wanted to allow students to define what the role could look like.

"Many just want to talk about being a student of color in a predominantly white environment and program," she said. "Some say that they can feel isolated, awkward, and unsure how to navigate increased conversations about race, where they are frequently the only person of color in the classroom or at their field placement. I've also ended up mediating a lot of restorative justice conversations, which I didn't necessarily expect—between students, with professors, and in classes, where a student or students feel harmed."

Ashia Martin, an MSW student, said that a nerve was struck for her upon noticing the underrepresentation of Black women in the program; she attended one of the drop-in sessions recently and found it "refreshing." "As a facilitator, Dr. St. Vil made us feel comfortable. There was no agenda," said Martin. "She was really interested in what we had to say, not checking off boxes. I appreciate that this forum exists; it allowed me to be expressive in a way that I wouldn't normally be. And it was pretty cool to be able to speak with others who might be

from a different culture than I am but have similar views."

After seeking the emotional support that St. Vil can provide, students voice gratitude for the validation of their experiences. "For racially underrepresented students, it important to have faculty of color," St. Vil said. "The need for this role has always been there. And students are glad that racial issues are being discussed more, but it can burn them out to sit through all these 'aha' moments others are having about things they've lived and experienced their whole lives. It can be a burden to people of color, especially without an outlet."

St. Vil, who attended Howard University, a historically Black college, says she wants to provide similar support to those she was given while a graduate student. "I know the impact that having mentors invested in your outcomes and well-being can have. I am invested in all students here, though for underrepresented students, it's especially important to provide a safe space as they try to navigate," she said.