# Mapping the Field of Data Ethics

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QUESTION: WHICH CATEGORY FITS OUR PAPER BEST: Research paper, Technical paper, or Conceptual Paper?

# Structured Abstract (250 words or less - must cut down)

Purpose: As tech ethics crises become strikingly frequent, data ethics coursework has never been more urgently needed. We map the field of data ethics curricula, tracking relations between courses, instructors, texts, and writers, and present an interactive tool for exploring these relations. Our tool is designed to be used in curricular research and development and provides multiple vantage points on this multidisciplinary field. We hope our tool will lead to exploration, conversation, and new courses that enrich the field.

Design/methodology/approach: We utilize data science methods to foster insights about the field of data ethics education and literature. We present a semantic, linked open data graph in RDF, along with accompanying analyses and tools for its exploration. This graph and its framework are open-source, giving users the capability to submit their own bibliographies and syllabi.

Research limitations/implications: The syllabi we work with are largely self-selected and represent only a subset of the field. Furthermore, our tool only represents a course's assigned literature rather than a holistic view of what is taught and the constructivist dynamics in any given classroom.

Findings: Our tool contributes to the field of data ethics education by providing an accessible means of exploring a birds-eye view of the field. For educators designing or refining a course, our tool provides a methodology for curricular introspection. The tool provides an opportunity for educators to more easily expand a syllabus beyond their own core expertise and pursue top aspirations in the field, such as teaching data ethics in a transdisciplinary manner, embedding computational problem-solving into coursework, and highlighting the perspectives of scholars from diverse backgrounds.

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organically from the data, we also intervene manually to identify and label some of these patterns. Patterns of interest include clusters of courses at particular institutions, the most-assigned literature in the field, and thought-provoking outliers. In the future we plan for our tool to foreground patterns in citations as well as clustered topic modeling of core subject areas in the data ethics literature.

Originality: Our curricular survey provides a new way of modeling a field of study, using existing ontologies to organize graph data into a instantly-comprehensible overview. We believe that this helps to bridge the gap between practical and theoretical factions in the field. Our unique framework may be repurposed to map the institutional knowledge structures of other disciplines, as well.

## **Keywords**

Data ethics education, data justice, AI ethics, tech ethics, pedagogical research, education research, transdisciplinary education, semantic web, data visualization

#### Introduction

From the spread of disinformation via social media, to class-biased dynamic pricing, to racial profiling in online systems that lead to real-world harms, teaching data ethics has never been more urgently needed. Data ethics is a burgeoning field, an interdisciplinary area of study and education that spans computer science, data science, statistics, the social sciences, and the humanities. Thankfully, there is growing recognition of the importance of data ethics as a foundational topic within education in data-driven fields.

We started by trying to create a course in data ethics. We realized we wanted a birds-eye view of the field - what is being taught, and what are core texts being taught? We wanted to approach these questions systematically, being data scientists ourselves. We therefore took a data science approach to this problem. We quickly realized that it would be useful to share our work with other data ethics educators, since data ethics is a multidisciplinary field that could greatly benefit from easily accessible vantage points on different corners of the field to spur collaboration and crossing boundaries. Furthermore, since our methodology can be applied widely to the survey of any discipline, we decided to open source our work and share it in the form of this research paper. Fundamentally, we are providing a methodology for curricular introspection.

Here we present an interactive tool we developed to provide an overview of data ethics courses and the literature they assign. Our tool is freely available at <a href="https://data-ethics.tech/">https://data-ethics.tech/</a>. It provides a "roadmap" to educators wishing to explore the expanding field of data ethics education. This tool was developed through a collaboration at Columbia University between Jonathan Reeve (a PhD Candidate and Lecturer in computational literary analysis), Isabelle Zaugg, PhD (a Postdoctoral Research Scientist and Lecturer in critical data studies), and

Tian Zheng (Chair of the Department of Statistics), with technical support from research assistants Serena Yuan and Zhuohan Zhang (MA students in Statistics).

To develop our tool, we used syllabi crowdsourced from Casey Fiesler et al.'s 2017 study and elsewhere, and created a graph database using semantic web technologies (linked open data, in Turtle RDF). The tool includes three interfaces: 1) a uni-course visualization that links data ethics courses with their institutional homes; 2) a course-text visualization that showcases the assigned literature from each course, and 3) a third "text-text" visualization still in development, which will highlight citation relationships between assigned texts and the wider data ethics field. Our data and framework are open-source, and users will soon be able to submit their own syllabi to update the map. Furthermore, our framework can be used to help map the institutional knowledge structures of other disciplines.

The graphical visualizations/explorers are designed to provide insight into the following questions relevant to educators: Which texts are most frequently assigned, and cited? And which texts are excluded? Are there important outliers that deserve more attention? Where are the disciplinary divides, and how can they be bridged? What are similarities and differences between data ethics courses? Which institutions, scholars, educators are innovating in this space? What are the major topic areas?

We designed this tool both to inform our own approach to teaching data ethics as well as to serve other educators wishing to design or redesign coursework. Our tool is designed to provide multiple entry points into this multidisciplinary field beyond one's own area of primary expertise. Our work builds upon others' efforts to understand and strengthen the field of data ethics, and we hope this project will serve as an additional stepping stone towards transdisciplinary exploration, conversation, and new courses that enrich the field. We also share insights that emerged from this project and shaped our development of a new data ethics course in the Department of Statistics at Columbia University.

# Background and Related Works

This project builds upon the work of a number of scholars who have sought to define and improve the field of data ethics education. Note that for the purposes of our analysis, we use the term "data ethics" as an umbrella term that encompasses the fields of AI ethics, tech ethics, data justice, and other overlapping subject areas aimed at improving technologists' ethical foundations and delivering equitable impacts from data-driven practices. While this paper will not delve into the subtle overlaps and important distinctions between these unique fields of research and education, we acknowledge these distinctions and suggest the following literature for further insight [Fiesler et al. (2020); Hao (2021); Metcalf et al. (2015); Nkonde and Patton (2021); Ochigame (2019); Raji et al. (2021); Sloane (2019); Taylor (2017); Thomas and Wiggins (2019); Zeffiro (2021);

In 2017, spurred by a New York Times article that argued that academics are "asleep at the wheel" when it comes to tech ethics (O'Neil, 2017), Prof. Casey Fiesler crowdsourced a list of close to 200 tech ethics syllabi being taught primarily in the U.S (Fiesler, 2019a). This collection depicted the outline of a nascent field of education. This repository in its raw form was credited with helping many educators design or refine a syllabus, as well construct compelling arguments for the value of a tech ethics course at their institution (Fiesler, 2019a). It also sparked several analyses to understand the contours and blindspots of this emerging field.

Fiesler, along with co-authors Natalie Garrett and Nathan Beard, used metadata from 202 of these tech ethics courses to analyze "What Do We Teach When We Teach Tech Ethics" (2020). First, they explored the disciplinary spread of these classes in terms of a course's home department, the instructor's home department, and the instructor's terminal degree. Computer Science was the most common departmental home both for courses and instructors, while Philosophy was the most common terminal degree. Next, they looked at major topic areas covered in these courses, the most common being Law & Policy, addressed in 57% of courses, and the least common being Medical/Health, addressed in less than 10% of courses. Finally, they assessed the most common learning outcomes promised students in these courses, including "critique," "see multiple perspectives," and "create solutions."

Their analysis showed great variability across content taught, which they suggest is not surprising considering the lack of standards in the field and its transdisciplinary nature (Fiesler et al., 2020). They suggest that this variability is positive; it represents an opportunity for educators to learn from one another's disciplinary expertise and teaching approaches. Despite variability, their analysis reveals key concepts considered critical in tech ethics, including algorithms, privacy, and inequality/justice. They also share a call to action to expand the field of tech ethics education. In particular, they highlight the need to develop approaches to fully integrate ethics into technical content for computer science (CS) students, especially at the impressionable initial stages of their education (Fiesler et al., 2020).

Our work builds upon Fiesler et al.'s work in several ways. First, our tool draws on the open-source syllabi shared in Fiesler's repository (Fiesler, 2017). Second, our tool responds to the calls to action embedded within Fiesler et al's analysis, namely to foster conversation among educators and bridge disciplinary divides. Third, our own resulting course design couples ethical reflection with computational practice and solution-building.

Our work also draws on the analysis of these syllabi by Inioluwa Deborah Raji, Morgan Klaus Scheuerman, and Razvan Amironesei's in their 2021 FAccT conference paper, "You Can't Sit With Us: Exclusionary Pedagogy in AI Ethics Education." Their analysis surfaces patterns of what the authors call "exclusionary pedagogy" in AI ethics. The authors argue that the predominance of computer scientists as instructors of these courses, hierarchies of knowledge that

elevate CS and other quantitative fields above the humanistic social sciences (HSS), and the siloing of the field from HSS perspectives, all promote technosolutionism and the myth of technologists as "ethical unicorns" (Raji *et al.*, 2021). They propose that tech ethics challenges are inherently interdisciplinary; therefore, education in this field must in turn include deep transdisciplinary collaboration and propose systemic rather than individualistic solutions.

Raji et al. argue that current gaps in transdisciplinary collaboration in AI Ethics can be perceived through the lack of transdisciplinary research output and siloed citations. This translates into the classroom vis-a-vis the assigning of literature with siloed citations. It is also reflected in the fact that only 2% of the 254 syllabi in their analysis allowed for "cross-disciplinary teaching or open courses with non-prohibitive requirements," both of which would encourage and enable students from different disciplines to enroll in a data ethics course (Raji *et al.*, 2021).

In terms of our aspirations in the field of data ethics, this is important on two fronts. First, courses that bridge disciplines and do not require pre-existing technical proficiency have the potential to attract new cohorts of students to engage with computational fields (Zaugg et al., 2021). It is important to bring students with ethical insights from other disciplinary backgrounds into the field of computation, and transdisciplinary data ethics coursework facilitate that. Second, by using data ethics as a bridge to open a new pathway into computational fields, there may be a potential to attract students from under-represented backgrounds who might otherwise hesitate to take foundational computational coursework because they don't see themselves represented in the field.

Both potential "pipeline" outcomes have the promise to address the calls data ethicists have made regarding the need to diversify the computational workforce in terms of disciplinary expertise, demographics, and lived experience (Lue, 2019; Rawlings-Goss et al., 2018; The Moore-Sloan Data Science Environments: New York University, 2018; West et al., 2019). While we can only speculate about the profiles of individual students taking these courses as well as the long-term outcomes of their learning, we hope this project will provide one small stepping stone towards further analysis and imagination of how data ethics education is (or could be) embedded within the disciplinary structures of universities, and the degree to which courses provide entrée into computational practice for students rooted in other disciplines.

Importantly, Raji et al. (2021) also highlight the need for courses to include student engagement with stakeholders from outside academia who are typically the most impacted by algorithmic harms. While this type of curricular approach largely escapes our tool's scope, which is limited by its primary focus on assigned literature, this key aspiration in data ethics education is essential to highlight in the context of this paper.

Responding to these varied calls to action in the field of data ethics education, we aim for our text-to-text tool, which maps citation patterns, to visually

highlight the issue of siloed citations and inspire cross-disciplinary collaboration. We also hope our tool's accessible interface will spur exploration of material across disciplinary divides. In our own case, our syllabus design builds off of our varied expertise in the humanistic social sciences, statistics, and data science, and will be co-taught without computational prerequisites to encourage a disciplinarily-diverse cohort of students.

We also note the 2015 "Pedagogical Approaches to Data Ethics" report by Jacob Metcalf, Kate Crawford, and Emily Keller at the Data & Society Research Institute. Based on their survey of existing data ethics courses, and informed by research on best practices in science and engineering ethics education, they propose that the following four approaches to data ethics education should be encouraged:

- "1) Integrative approaches are preferable to stand-alone modules... 2) When possible, integration with design/practical work should be encouraged. Ethics should be associated with problem-solving, not just rule-following or prevention of harm.
- 3) The micro-ethics of research should be intellectually and practically associated with broader social goods. Neither the RCR [Responsible Conduct of Research] approach nor broad social goods alone are adequate. 4) Culture, collective responsibility, and collaboration are critical components of successful research ethics education." (p. 3, (Metcalf et al., 2015))

We developed our tool with the intention of facilitating further analysis, imagination, and innovation to strengthen the field of data ethics education. Providing our database and tool as a starting point, we suggest further research questions that draw on the insights and aspirations for the field shared by the scholars above. Research questions ripe for investigation include:

What are the most frequently assigned texts in data ethics courses? What are the most frequently cited texts among those assigned in data ethics courses? What patterns in data ethics education can we deduce from looking at similarities and differences between courses offered at different universities? What are major topic areas in data ethics courses? Do they map onto particular approaches to promote ethical data science such as FAccT? How many data ethics courses help students make the leap from "critique" to computational problem-solving? How many courses are fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration? How many courses include community stakeholder engagement?

How many courses are linking micro-ethics with an exploration of data scientists' collective responsibility for the broader social good How might our "roadmap" be useful for educators designing data ethics courses? What are its limitations (reducing a course to its assigned texts, for example) and how might they be addressed through complementary efforts?

Beyond these formative works, our approach to this project has been enriched by the many courses and texts we reviewed during the development of our tool and our new course. Our work has also been shaped by input and advice from the following educator-innovators in the field: Casey Fiesler, Michael Zimmer, Karina Alexanyan, Daniel Castaño, and Frédérick Bruneault.

#### Methods

We built a website to visualize these connections, as a force-directed network visualization in JavaScript, so that it may be explored by a wider user base. We also built a mechanism for users to submit their own data ethics syllabi to our database; this way, our literature review will always stay up to date. A further step will be to generalize this framework so that it may be used to map any academic discipline, given a list of courses and their syllabus URLs.

We begin by collecting data surrounding university courses. Using course lists such as the tech ethics curriculum list provided by Casey Fiesler et al, and Dennis Tennen et al.'s Open Syllabus Project, we are able to derive preliminary information: the names of the courses, the instructors, and the host departments, among others (see Fiesler, 2019b; Nowogrodzki, 2016). Fiesler et al's list is a openly-editable Google Sheets spreadsheet, called Tech Ethics Curriculum, containing data about roughly three hundred courses. The spreadsheet tracks courses' titles, host universities, departments, syllabus URLs, and whether the course is required by its department.

Syllabus URLs are only present for about half of these listed courses, however. Many entries are marked as "not online."

We then represent the data as a series of subject-verb-object triples, in the Resource Description Framework, or RDF. This graphical data structure, is the next-generation language for representing structured data on the web, so that it is highly machine-readable. It is the same structure which lies underneath

The semantic web, also known as "Web 3.0" or linked open data, is a relatively new system of conventions for standardizing and encoding graph data, such that it is universally interoperable, in a language known as RDF, or the

Resource Description Framework. Some of the most well-known projects in the field include DBPedia, the set of parsed and inferred data from Wikipedia, and Wikidata, the data set which proposes to be the knowledge basis for Wikipedia. At its most basic, RDF data may be represented as a series of subject-verb-object triples, where each node has a stable URL. Social relationships between people, for instance, may be described as \text{person:Bob}
\text{relation:is-friends-with} \text{person:Alicia}, where the angle-bracketed entities resolve to URIs: \text{person:Bob} may expand to http://people.org/Bob, and relation: would expand to http://relations.org/is-friends-with. The properties of each node—subject, verb, or object—are then defined at the web pages served by those URLs.

In this way, we can describe There exist a number of ontologies, or pre-defined sets of relations, which may be used to describe entities within their domains. We use a number of ontologies in conjunction: the Curriculum Course Syllabus Ontology (CCSO) describes relations between courses, universities, syllabi, professors, and learning materials such as texts (Katis  $et\ al.,\ 2018$ ); the Bibliographic Ontology (Bibliontology) describes metadata for articles, books, videos, and other media (Pertsas and Constantopoulos, 2017); and the Citation Typing Ontology (CiTO) describes citation relations between texts (Peroni and Shotton, 2012).

Fig. 1 shows an example directed graph visualization, illustrating relations between these entities.

Given a course syllabus URL, we are able to download the syllabus, convert it to plain text where necessary, and quasi-automatically identify its bibliographic references. Since existing automated approaches to the extraction of bibliographic metadata are written for scholarly articles, rather than syllabi, we must supplement their use with manual extraction. Once these bibliographic items are extracted, we query bibliographic APIs such as CrossRef and Semantic Scholar, which allow us to resolve these texts to stable identifiers like DOIs. These APIs also provide us with rich metadata surrounding the citation networks of these texts, both outgoing (references to other texts) and incoming (citations of the article in later works).

Anystyle: https://github.com/inukshuk/anystyle

We then resolve universities and departments to their Wikidata identifiers, which allows us to retrieve additional information with which we can organize our data, for instance the geographic coordinates of the university and its founding date.

We also resolve instructors and authors to their ORCIDs, where applicable, and this allows us to retrieve an author's other publications, and their past and present institutional affiliations.

At this point, we are left with a number of duplicates, for texts and authors, since there are a number of ways of citing a text in natural language. For this, we use a deduplication algorithm, which collapses texts which pass a certain similarity threshold.

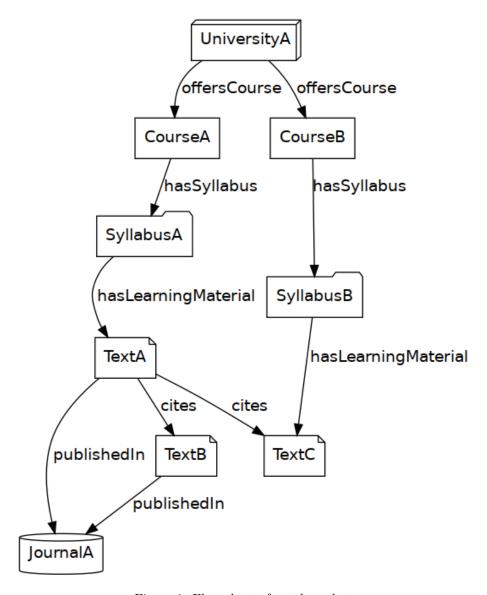


Figure 1: Flow chart of ontology data

#### Conclusions

- Describe our course, its interdisciplinarity
- Be explicit about our contribution

## Findings and Contributions to the Field

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Our tool contributes to data ethics education by providing an accessible means of exploring a birds-eye view of the field. For educators designing or refining a course, our tool provides a methodology for curricular introspection. The tool provides an opportunity for educators to more easily expand a syllabus beyond their own core expertise and pursue top aspirations in the field, such as teaching data ethics in a transdisciplinary manner, embedding computational problem-solving into coursework, and highlighting the perspectives of scholars from diverse backgrounds.

While patterns in data ethics education emerge organically from the data, we also intervene manually to identify and label some of these patterns. Patterns of possible interest to educators include clusters of courses at institutions, the most-assigned literature in the field, and thought-provoking outliers. In the future we plan for our tool to foreground patterns in citations as well as clustered topic modeling of core subject areas in the data ethics literature.

Our data visualization allows one to quickly identify both valuable patterns in texts assigned, as well as outliers. Our visualization prioritizes users' engagement with both consensus and outliers, which is important considering that racial justice scholarship, feminist theory, and efforts to "decolonize curricula" have highlighted how the process by which texts gain importance and "enter the canon" is not always meritocratic and often "outsider" voices deserve to be centered. This is all the more true in a field such as data ethics where critical voices are challenging established perspectives, practices, and institutions. This semantic web approach also allows us to be multilingual by default, since much of this data, such as that gleaned from Wikipedia, is available in many languages.

#### Conclusion

As a multidisciplinary and quickly growing field, data ethics educators can benefit from a birds-eye view of curricular practice and real-time innovation. Our database and tool provide a starting point for this exploration and analysis. Our literature review provides an overview of the foundational aspirations of the field, which educators may wish to manifest within their course design. Top aspirations of the field include embedding ethics within computational problem-solving, offering multi-disciplinary courses without technical prerequisites as an

entry point into the field for disciplinary and demographically diverse students, and embedding opportunities for students to engage with stakeholders of data-driven practices outside the halls of academia and the field of tech.

Our course is informed by everything we learned from this project. While a minority of data ethics courses include practical components and work on solutions/pathways for mitigating these issues, our course includes practical exercises in putting those ideas to use. Teaching cross-disciplinarily between Stats, CS, humanities, social sciences, we have opened our course to a mixed classroom with no technical prerequisites. We are engaging with literature across many fields, teaching foundational computational skills and problem-solving alongside reading and writing assignments that engage with some of the most-cited thought pieces as well as important outliers. We push students beyond identifying ethical issues to identify new horizons of possible solutions. As we pilot and reiterate our course, we look forward to utilizing this tool to consider new perspectives and approaches in the field of data ethics education.

Most importantly, we hope that other educators benefit from the tool. As data ethicists ourselves, we care about openness and transparency, and so we have open-sourced this data, so that other researchers can use our work to answer their own questions. We hope that our framework may also be used to help map the institutional knowledge structures of even more disciplines.

#### **Author Roles**

LET ME KNOW IF YOU'D LIKE TO INCLUDE THIS SECTION. IF SO, PLEASE EDIT IT TO REPRESENT YOUR WORK ACCURATELY (FOR-GIVE MY INABILITY TO DESCRIBE OTHERS' CONTRIBUTIONS FULLY - ISABELLE).

The tool development, paper, and syllabus designed were transdisciplinary collaborations between all three authors, who met regularly to discuss these projects. For transparency, we wish to further define each author's role. The first author did the majority of the conceptual and technical design of the tool, with regular input from the third author, as well as contributed to the abstract, methods, and conclusion sections of the paper. The second author shaped the conceptual frame of the paper and tool while providing input on social and educational theory perspectives. She also conducted the literature review, foundational to the tool design and argument of the paper. She also authored and/or edited the bulk of the paper, including final editorial work. The third author spurred the project and provided funding and an institutional home for our work in the Department of Statistics at Columbia University. She also provided deep technical and conceptual insights to the tool and paper, and aided in imagining future directions of the work. The first and second authors, with input from the third author, designed the data ethics course described in the paper. We plan to collaboratively teach the course in 2022.

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