Data Ethics: Big Data, Algorithmic Bias, and Research Ethics

Sociology of the Family
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Northeastern University
NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks

Feel free to ask questions at any point during the presentation!

“We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.”

- Marshall McLuhan, the 20th century media theorist.

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What do we mean by 'Data Ethics' and why are we talking about it?

What we're doing today:

- Exploring a few major **concepts** related to big data and data ethics
- Connecting the course **readings** to these larger ideas
- Having **discussions** that allow us to engage with ethical and practical questions pertaining to big data, algorithmic biases/neutrality, machine learning, and the professional application of these tools in the field

Slides available at **http://bit.ly/diti_fall2020-blum2**

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Big Data is here (and it's getting *bigger*)

Other than YouTube, what other algorithms come to mind that shape your tastes/preferences and social interactions?

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“The models were rarely able to predict a student’s GPA, for example, and they were even worse at predicting whether a family would get evicted, experience unemployment, or face material hardship. And the models gave almost no insight into how resilient a child would become.”

from the 2020 Boston Globe Article, “Algorithms may never really figure us out, thank goodness”

But does the problem lie inherently in the **algorithm** or its **application**? What do you think? Who is to blame for this failure?

Another example, from Prof. Lazar at the C-19 Research Lab at Northeastern: https://www.networkscienceinstitute.org/covid-19

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"Finding all that information about the mother, her three children and their three fathers in the county's maze of databases would have taken Byrne hours he did not have; **The algorithm, however, searched the files and rendered its score in seconds."** from the 2018 New York Magazine article by Dan Hurley

What are the industries/public policy areas that are most prone to errors in human judgment? How would they benefit from computational/algorithmic decision making?

Imagine you are a policymaker (e.g. a social worker, a vaccine-distribution manager, anyone whose decisions will impact the lives of many others). **How should you go about utilizing AI and machine learning, and big data, in general?**

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Thank you!

If you have any questions, contact DITI at nulab.info@gmail.com

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Slides, handouts, and data available at **http://bit.ly/diti_fall2020-blum2**
Schedule an appointment with us! **https://calendly.com/diti-nu**

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