Role of Government Agencies in Data Driven Welfare

Dhruval Bhatt
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Despite the limitations of technological approaches in decision making that impact human lives, it is a rapidly adopted phenomenon that is here to stay. Use of technology in administering government programs is championed for increasing efficiency, establishing consistency and even, reducing human errors and biases. However, this optimism for data driven approaches is challenged by likes of Virginia Eubanks, the author of Automating Inequality, who cautions that the pervasive use of digital tools and tracking in government databases, leads to excessive surveillance, policing and places an unjust burden on society's poor and working class. Her compelling arguments on how automated systems can rely on limited public data and subject recipients of public welfare to frustrating and inhumane decisions, raises the questions, is it even possible for government agencies to utilize technology to allocate welfare?

In Automating Inequality, Eubanks parallels the data driven approaches in welfare to the poorhouses of nineteenth century, where poor people were subject to loss of agency and harsh conditions akin to criminals just to gain access to public resources. Packaged with the promise of fair resource allocation, automated decision-making in government agencies, is nothing but "digital poorhouses" built to conveniently absolve middle and upper class from empathically supporting the less fortunate. While it may not be possible to wait for a massive cultural shift in how the society views and treats the poor, government agencies requesting and adopting these digital tools should consider it's ethical implications and work with technologists to help capture the nuances of public welfare. The ethical role of the tool depends on how we view the role of public welfare. Support for social welfare can be on the grounds of ethical theories such as, virtue theory, social contract theory and utilitarianism.

In an ideal society driven by virtue, "reaching one's highest potential", the act of helping people in need would reinforce virtue of generosity in the giver so government agency and tax payers would be happy as long as someone's need is fulfilled (Quinn 81). Therefore, the goal of social welfare and the automated tool is to identify anyone who needs help without assessment of worthiness or returns to society. However, in a large society where the ties between contribution made, service administered and people helped are often not tangible or visible, it is unlikely that

people feel virtue reinforced. Yet people might promote social welfare through government agencies, to build a safety net for themselves. Knowing that anyone could go through poverty or become a victim of abuse, there should be social contract to help those in need till they can fend for themselves. Here the role of government agency and optimal technology would be to identify deserving candidates that are the neediest and monitoring how they use the helping hand to rise out of their situation. Finally, people are most easily convinced if a service would lead to utility for all. In a utilitarian vein of thought, the optimal tool would be the one that can identify the most deserving candidate as the one to use the least resources to rise to a contributing position.

While there may be strong proponents of one theory over the other, practically, a cohesive society must strike a balance. It is inhumane to consistently give aid to those with the ability to return the favor and limited resources would not allow unlimited virtue. Algorithms can be utilized to asses many competing factors and optimized to end goals set forth by agencies. With limited view of data and time, humans may not be able to consider far reaching factors that determine need and ability to recover, but algorithms can help with that. Yet, algorithms cannot decide the ethics of a society and end goal of the agency. People should proactively think about the social implications and ensure algorithms are working accordingly. As the need for this feedback increases, specializations such as computational social science, will prepare more people with domain expertise and method awareness to make this an even more robust process. Additionally, agencies should understand how humans use the algorithmic results reported. If it is not as intended, they should collaborate with human machine interface specialist to implement output reports that ensure that algorithm's decision is used just as a tool.

Eubanks warns that digital poorhouses are even more dangerous than traps of the past as they are not limited by physical resources and can expand quickly, the records can be stored indefinitely, and algorithms are harder to understand and improve (Eubanks 184-187). However, with awareness of these limitations, administrating agencies can institute policies, such as, limitation on years of record used to avoid penalizing or monitoring in perpetuity. While many advanced algorithms do currently operate as a black box, academia and industry are making efforts to improve interpretability. In the meantime, the general understanding of technology can be improved by providing basic training of what the algorithm does and how. With that, the

employees of government agencies who are on the frontlines of the process can provide feedback to improve tools and push back when the tools are inadequate.

Fundamentally, government agencies must emphasize that these tools are employed to aid humans make better decisions versus humans being hired to administer the tool's decision. A cultural shift in the administering agencies is needed to reduce the tedious fact finding and paperwork with the help of tools while empowering the employees to critically engage in the process to support the end goal. The rapid expansion of digital tools is problem when inequitable practices are coded and used with apathy but a "woke" public sector workforce can help build better tools and the optimized solution can also be rapidly spread with digital technology. Ultimately, as agencies adopt new technologies in welfare allocation, the greed of efficiency should not compromise humanity but also, the fear of inequity should not stop progress.

References

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