Big Data, Data Science, and Civil Rights

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Mr. Hoover

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Your, and everyone else’s, civil rights might be in jeopardy and not just because of certain politicians nefarious deeds. A less predictable, and not so human, force is at work. That force is… data analytics; I know it does not sound overly scary. But, it is a real problem that needs to be addressed. In order to understand the issue one must understand its components: civil rights and data analytics

Civil rights are defined as “the basic right to be free from unequal treatment based on certain protected characteristics (race, gender, disability, etc.) in settings such as employment, education, housing, and access to public facilities” (findlaw.com). Civil rights have come a long way thanks to people like Martin Luther King Jr., [Harvey Milk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvey_Milk), Bayard Rustin, and Rosa Parks. But, a new threat unlike any before it could unintentionally harm the minorities that fought so hard.

That threat is data analytics which is “the process of examining data sets in order to draw conclusions about the information they contain, increasingly with the aid of specialized systems and software” (techtarget.com). Data analytics can be an incredibly helpful tool but, one that has a major drawback… unintended bias. Data analytics can, and has, disproportionately influenced minority groups in a negative manner and, the majority in a positive manner.

These problems need to be addressed by the individuals that know the most about both fields. Unfortunately an individual skilled in data analytics and the application of civil rights in a legal and corporate setting is rare (if not nonexistent). Which effectively means experts from both fields must work together to find a solution, which of course brings about its own laundry list of problems. Communication between leaders of each field is sorely needed alas even when they do have discussions the vernacular barrier prevents any real progress.

The problem only worsens as time goes on; as the tainted data gets passed on to new software or simply affirms its own inherent bias. Which is why we need to push for a solution before it is too late, whether that solution be more corporate (or government) funding or some sort of joint task force to tackle this modern day Goliath. People are being hurt by something that is actually supposed to be fair and eliminate human bias and it needs to stop.

In the end it is up to everyone not just the experts to solve this problem. If Susan the contractor contacts her Senator or State Representative about this issue it could help get this issue pushed into a more prominent spotlight. If Reid the high school teacher discusses this issue with his students he could inspire them to become a computer age civil rights hero.

While their most likely is not an answer that will magically fix the problem that does not mean that it is unfixable. The solution will come only after careful collaboration between the people who know the most about both fields. The future could be truly equal but, we must first fix this virus of our society.