

## Data and Internet Ethics

### Course Description

These days, data and algorithms run our lives. More and more decisions, and decision-making procedures, are being taken out of the hands of humans and instead put into the hands of automated systems. Algorithms are now being used to automate decision making in the criminal justice system, in consumer finance and in the education system. Social media algorithms can influence what we buy, whether we vote, the kinds of beliefs we form about other racial or social groups and the kinds of norms of discourse we internalize. In this course we will consider the ethical implications of the design and implementation of the algorithms that structure our daily lives, as well as the ethical implications of the various ways in which our data is used by corporations and our government. Along the way we will seek to gain conceptual clarity about the various competing considerations at play in these areas such as privacy, bias, fairness, efficiency, autonomy, well-being and more.

### Section 1: Algorithms and Justice

Right now, algorithms are being used in the criminal justice system to determine prison sentence length, in consumer finance to determine who qualifies for a loan and in the education system to determine tenure and firing decisions. This section will explore the ethical challenges that surround the implementation of such algorithms. Specifically, we will analyze the notions of algorithmic bias and related notion of fairness, and consider under what conditions, if any, the implementation of algorithms of these sorts is morally permissible.

#### Potential Readings

**Clinton Castro**, "What's Wrong With Machine Bias"

**Kathleen Creel & Deborah Hellman**, "The Algorithmic Leviathan: Arbitrariness, Fairness, and Opportunity in Algorithmic Decision-Making Systems"

**Batya Friedman & Helen Nissenbaum**, "Bias in Computer Systems"

**Brian Hedden**, "On statistical criteria of algorithmic fairness"

**Cathy O'Neil**, *Weapons of Math Destruction* (selected chapters on formal models and justice)

**Alan Rubel, Clinton Castro and Adam Pham**, "Algorithms, Agency, and Respect for Persons"

**Kate Vredenburg**, "The Right to Explanation"

**ProPublica**: Machine Bias

### Section 2: Algorithms and Society

In this section, we will explore our interactions with algorithms on a more personal level. Each of us use search engine tools to navigate both online and real-world spaces. However, those search engine tools do not provide unfiltered access to the world. We will begin by examining the role played by search engine technology in reinforcing racist and prejudiced beliefs. We will then follow this up by considering what, if anything, should be done about this, and with whom this potential obligation lays.

#### Potential Readings

**Deborah Hellman**, "When is Discrimination wrong" (excerpt)

**Safiya Umoja Noble**, *Algorithms of Oppression* (selected chapters on search engine bias with respect to

gender and race)

**Tommie Shelby**, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent and Reform* (selected chapter on racism as ideology vs structural)

### **Section 3: Data and Surveillance**

Internet technologies collect, store and use our personal data for a myriad of reasons, from providing us personalized shopping and media experiences, to finding and catching people who have committed crimes. In this section we will ask questions about whether we have a right to our data and how to appropriately balance competing societal interests such as safety and liberty.

#### Potential Readings

**David Brin**, “Three cheers for the Surveillance Society!”

**Richard Spinello**, “Informational Privacy”

**Richard Spinello**, “Privacy and Social Network Technology”

**Judith Jarvis Thomson**, The Right to Privacy

**Shoshana Zuboff**, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*

**Philosophy Bites**: Tom Sorrell on Surveillance

**Radiolab**: Eye in the Sky

### **Section 4: Social Media and Society**

In this section we will explore the impact of social media technologies and their incentive structures on society, democracy and each of us individually with respect to our capacity to develop into thoughtful, well-rounded citizens. We will then examine whether this creates any obligation on us as individuals to refrain from using social media.

#### Potential Readings

**Tim Aylsworth & Clinton Castro**, “Is there a Duty to Be a Digital Minimalist?”

**Jaron Lanier**, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (selected chapters)

**C. Thi Nguyen**, “How Twitter Gamifies Communication”

**Cathy O’Neil**, *Weapons of Math Destruction* (selected chapters on online advertising and civic life)

**Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**: Social Networking and Ethics