Manifesting the Sociotechnical: Experimenting With Methods for Social Context and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

Critiques of 'algorithmic fairness' have counseled against a purely technical approach. Recent work from the FAT* conference has warned specifically about abstracting away the social context that these automated systems are operating within and has suggested that "[fairness work] require[s] technical researchers to learn new skills or partner with social scientists" [*Fairness and abstraction in sociotechnical systems*, Selbst et al. 2019, FAT* '19]. That "social context" includes groups outside the academy organizing for data and/or tech justice (e.g., Allied Media Projects, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, data4blacklives, etc). These struggles have deep historical roots but have become prominent in the past several years alongside broader citizen-science efforts. In this CRAFT session we as STEM researchers hope to initiate conversation about methods used by community organizers to analyze power relations present in that social context. We will take this time to learn together and discuss if/how these and other methods, collaborations and efforts can be used to actualize oft-mentioned critiques of algorithmic fairness and move toward a data justice-oriented approach.

Many scholars and activists have spoken on how to approach social context when discussing algorithmic fairness interventions. Community organizing and attendant methods for power analysis present one such approach: documenting all stakeholders and entities relevant to an issue and the nature of the power differentials between them. The facilitators for this session are not experts in community organizing theory or practice. Instead, we will share what we have learned from our readings of decades of rich work and writings from community organizers. This session is a collective, interdisciplinary learning experience, open to all who see their interests as relevant to the conversation.

We will open with a discussion of community organizing practice: What is community organizing, what are its goals, methods, past and ongoing examples? What disciplines and intellectual lineages does it draw from? We will incorporate key sources we have found helpful for synthesizing this knowledge so that participants can continue exposing themselves to the field after the conference. We will also consider the concept of social power, including power that the algorithmic fairness community holds. Noting that there are many ways to theorize and understand power, we will share the framings that have been most useful to us. We plan to present different tools, models and procedures for doing power analysis in various organizing settings.

We will propose to our group that we conduct a power analysis of our own. We have prepared a hypothetical but realistic scenario involving risk assessment in a hospital setting as an example. However, we encourage participants to bring their own experiences to the table, especially if they pertain in any way to data injustice. We also invite participants to bring examples of ongoing organizing efforts with which algorithmic fairness researchers could act in solidarity. Participants will walk away from this session with 1) an understanding of the key terms and sources necessary to gain further exposure to these topics and 2) preliminary experience analyzing power in realistic, grounded scenarios.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Socio-technical systems**.

KEYWORDS

community organizing, fairness, power analysis, data justice