THE NEW SOCIAL CALCULUS – MINIMISE RISK AND MAXIMISE GAIN

PERPETUAL
29/06/2016

Stanford University's **Lucy Bernholz, Ph.D.** explains how Crisis Text Line in the United States provides a textbook example of the new social calculus and using data for good.

> "For a long time, nonprofits and foundations have been seeking to improve outcomes. Getting there requires all kinds of new measurement schemes, thus the last two decades have brought us talk of social return on investment, quality-adjusted life years, and many other calculations. I think it's time we recognise we're operating with a whole new social calculus.
>
> The digital data that now feeds our strategies, provides fodder for performance measures, allows new kinds of analysis, and brings all sorts of new privacy, consent, and security risks that require us to consider the variables and

> the outcomes of doing good."

Crisis Text Line **(CTL)** offers us a textbook example of social calculus. With a seemingly minor technical switch – changing crisis counselling from phone based to text based – this program repeatedly demonstrates how digital interventions differ from analogue.

Here's the thumbnail sketch: CTL helps counselling centres switch over from using telephone calls to help teens in distress, to being able to respond to text messages. This puts help in the palm of teens' hands and on the devices they're already actively using. Of course, the same devices function as phones, but it's possible today's teens don't even realise that – they may send 1,000 texts a day but never once lift the phone to their ears.

> "While it may seem simple from a teen's perspective, for the counselling centres a switch from phone to text is huge."

First, counsellors can respond to many teens at once. Second, it's possible to follow up with texters (not so easy by phone), keep conversations going, and have conversations with teens even when they need to be quiet on their end (during the school day, in a bathroom stall with bullies outside, or in one room when an abusive parent is in the other). Third, a digital record full of data (the content of the message) and metadata (time, area code, length of exchange) is automatically generated for each interaction between counsellor and teen.

While all of these changes matter, it's this last one that requires a new calculus. Each text exchange "automatically" creates a digital trail, and these trails can be aggregated and kept, requiring us to consider whole new variables in how we provide help.

On the plus side, each text exchange creates a new dataset of information on teens in crisis. The information it can contain – including types of crises, times of concern, geographic hotspots for certain types of calls – can be quite valuable to school administrators, researchers, and policymakers.

Lucy Bernholz, Ph.D.

Each “call” now creates two outcomes – a helped teen and new data for the dataset – where there used to only be one.

Of course, this new possibility comes with new responsibilities as well.

> "We must grapple with questions like: How to get meaningful consent from the teen to keep their data? With whom, how, and when can the aggregated data be shared safely, ethically, and responsibly?"

When and how should the data be destroyed? How do the telecoms – which also have a copy of the metadata – fit into the equation?

These considerations are why the possibilities require a new calculus. It’s not as easy – or as arithmetic – as “1 action = 2 outcomes.” It’s more like “1 action = (2 outcomes + several new considerations)”

Those of us using digital tools – cell phones, cameras, audio recordings, attendance databases, social media responses, etc. – must figure out how to minimise risk and

maximise gain. Doing so requires new levels of attention to how the digital data are managed, what rights the people “in the data” have over their data, and what new forms of governance must be created. Crisis Text Line is a textbook case of this new social calculus, but all of us who are trying to achieve social outcomes in the digital age are going to have help with the math.