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a sociologist in tech

by monica lee

I'm Monica Lee, and I graduated from the University of Chicago seven years ago after interning and accepting a job at Facebook. I currently lead the Core Data Science: Political & Organizational Science team, which is part of a larger team dedicated to various forms of Computational Social Science. I have also had the pleasure of helping to create, grow, and guide the team responsible for Civic Integrity across all the FB apps.

Being a sociologist in tech right now means that you are critically important in understanding the impact of the internet/social media on societal institutions, and therefore what the future of the internet should be. 'Society' as we know it is in a moment of transition. Everything is getting automated; lives are moving toward online environments, even virtual reality. What does it mean to build this new world responsibly? Ethically? What does it mean to guide the future toward the right path? We laugh about 'Tethics' on the TV show *Silicon Valley*, but the power of internet architecture is real, and companies are much better off when people actually like them for doing the right thing. Understanding and learning from societal impact is now a job.

My relationship to the scientific literature has changed radically since my job became oriented toward bringing social science to bear on making product decisions. When I was in grad school, the only reason I read 'the literature' was to find stepping stones for my own ideas. Naïve and hubristic, I picked the most sophisticated theories and methods as fodder for criticism and a launching pad for explaining why *my* work was 'better.' Nowadays, I read literature because I need to learn from it; I am (partially) responsible for something very powerful with real world impact.

I now understand that sociological ideas are not an intellectual game; they help us think through the new policies and inventions that might help people find safety during natural disasters or slow down rumor propagation on WhatsApp. And when one is actually responsible for something in the world, one learns humility. There are people in the world who know more about X than I do, so I best shut up and listen.

My training in sociological theory has been surprisingly useful. Civic Integrity work constantly raises the question of what it means to maximize collective good. Each decision to enforce against hate or misinformation requires navigating near impossible tradeoffs. For instance, privacy vs. safety: Do

we mine private chat data in order to detect and prevent the mobilization of violence? Quality information vs. free speech: Do we enforce against misinformation at the expense of silencing people's self-expression? In all of these instances, reasonable people can disagree on how to balance these values, but as an election draws near, a decision must be made. As difficult as this work has been, it is also an exciting real world application of the thick books that I poured over during grad school. My parents are shocked that studying Kant could be so practically useful!

I've also found great value in the empirical literature that never interested me in grad school. I realized this for the first time on an airplane to India, where I was headed for two weeks of field research plus meetings with government officials and academic experts. Tech life is a crazy whirlwind, and I thankfully found myself with 16 airplane hours to learn from scratch about politics in India. I was relieved when my political scientist colleague handed me the stack of papers: 5-6 papers about general voting mechanics down to the most local levels, surveys about how Indians perceived fairness in their last few elections broken down by demographic groups and about how social media is used in and around elections. Basic empirical work, completely atheoretical, but filled with hard-fought facts and honesty about what is still not understood. In grad school, I found this work to be 'low level;' as a techie, this sort of documented basic knowledge is a total goldmine.

Likewise, I've found new value in reading ethnographic and deep interview work. Tech has tremendous support for certain types of research, but it's generally bad at research that takes time, depth, and human reflection. Also, there are many questions academics can ask respondents that tech companies cannot. I recently started reading Mario Small's *Someone to Talk to* because of its direct relevance to a new project at work. It's really a perfect resource. When I picked it up, it didn't escape me that just 7 years ago when I was in grad school and Mario Small was teaching down the hall, I couldn't be bothered to read something so close to the ground and small in scale—"come on, I'm a '*networks*' person!" Yet, now that I'm compelled to think seriously about how people find social support, how technology might aid this or harm it unintentionally, and how we can build something that's good for people, it's not the graph-mining big networks scholars who can help; it's the sociologists who interface with people in far better and richer ways than I am capable.

Monica Lee is a computational sociologist. She earned her PhD in Sociology from the University of Chicago and has published works on quantitative methods for measuring culture, text mining, musical taste, graph mining, challenges and limitations of big data, and ethics & morality. She currently leads the Core Data Science: Political & Organizational Science team at Facebook. This group of scientists performs basic research on political behavior on social media, define and model election related social media abuses, and design products that encourage healthy civic discourse and reduce the prevalence of platform abuse.