

Episode 179 - Dr. Virginia Eubanks: Casework, Social Justice, and the Information Age (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We're in social work. Hello this is Charles Syms your host of in social work welcome this episode is the second of two parts looking at social justice in the Information Age. In this part our guest Dr. Virginia Eubanks participates in a question and answer discussion with members of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work community. Their conversation includes the digital surveillance of poor and working class communities. The problematic effects of digital information systems on the work of case and public assistance workers as well as thoughts about the challenges of the information economy. Unemployment today and in the future. Our guest also answers the question What is Digital Justice Dr. Eubanks is an associate professor of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University at Albany State University of New York and a forward academic fellow at New America in Washington D.C.. Dr. Eubanks received her Ph.D. in science and technology studies from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. And much of her research and writing centers on issues of social justice in the digital age. She is the author of Digital dead in fighting for social justice in the Information Age.

[00:02:03] Dr. Eubanks is also among the founders of our knowledge our power a grass roots welfare rights and antipoverty organization and popular technology workshops a place where people come together to combat social economic and political injustice in the Information Age. The discussion took place in March of 2015. Youth journalists play the cello. Thank you. It's really the words Israel justice. Just want to speak a little bit more that my family's unities version of them. Yes. And I think this is one of the reasons I'm really committed actually to writing about child protection is because I think it's a case where the stakes are so clear. Right. Like you do not want to lose track of kids particularly in foster an adoption. Right because. Terrible terrible things can happen to kids. The foster adoption system. So I am absolutely not saying that we should not use every tool at our disposal to make sure that we don't lose track. My concern is a similar concern to the concern I have in public services which is that the system that we currently have is not set up in my opinion to support intact families to get the resources that they need to care for themselves and their children effectively. I think we have a hugely disproportionate we have huge issues with disproportionality in foster and adoption. Right. So you know Dorothy Roberts great work and shattered bonds which is like mostly African-American children are taken out of homes. Three to 10 times as often as white children. And I suspect that having more efficient systems does nothing to address issues of disproportionality and might in fact make them worse. So that's my concern around child protective.

[00:03:54] So there's been some great work recently about like you know if all child protective workers had so they can do all this great work in the field and I haven't looked into that specifics. So it might be doing some great work. I don't know but I know what the people I work with in the Welfare Rights Movement I know where their suspicions would be about that which is like Oh you're making a more efficient system to steal our children. And that is something that we really need to think about. Just a highly surveilled and not just disproportionate this personality economic or disproportionality. Even just neighborhoods so neighborhoods where one of these people have some cash and just be highly surveilled would be any kind of this is just something that just what is that when our of is just heaven. I think the surveilled neighborhoods thing is a really big part of it.

Right. So my suspicion is probably rates of neglect and abuse are not that much different. Like high levels of stress can certainly make this kind of stuff worse but I'm not sure that rates of occurrence are that much different across classes to explain the highly different rate of engagement with the child protective services system that we currently have across classes. I think the difference is that poor and working communities are highly surveilled and all other people's behavior is very visible and also this whole thing about the difference between abuse and neglect. Right. So not having resources can also get you into the child protective services system.

[00:05:39] So the visibility that all these visibility technologies going back to law enforcement stuff body worn cameras for police now like literally will be on all the time and anything entering that camera is evidence. Right. So your kids running around on the street like or you know a catch or something and unintentionally not even when an interaction with the family and that becomes evidence that. Right. And where are police wearing body worn cameras most right there in poor and working class communities and often in communities of color. So the entryway to the child protective services is very much mediated by technology. And then another big question is if you can ever get out of that system once you're in it right. And I might get my numbers a little bit off but it's very close. My understanding is that if you are accused of abuse or neglect even if it's not founded that goes into the connections or another system and that that record is retained. I think for 10 years after your youngest child turns 25. So we're talking you know 35 years that this is now part of your record. And one of the big questions that I have is there's supposed to be firewalls around this information. Right. But we know that at least informally this kind of information gets to housing right or gets to criminal justice. And so how are these systems connected to each other. That's actually the next work I'll be doing after digital poorhouse is working with some of these organizations that I've been doing research with to actually map the data flows in their neighborhoods. We're going to do one like in public housing and we're going to do one in prison re-entry services.

[00:07:22] And there's a third that we haven't sort of decided what it will be yet but we just don't know. Right. Like is the database that public housing uses connected to the child protective database connected to the criminal justice database and how and what are the rules for information sharing and since devolution. We know there's a bunch of nonprofit and for profit organizations involved in the mix and what are their rules for information sharing and is this being sold to data brokers and are people data mining that's information right. So it just keeps going and I think we know very little about it right now and we really need to know more like it's really I think it's deeply important. I'm biased about it but I think it's deeply important. You to process. Yes. Or were you looking at it Susan's base to screen cyclone rescue and go back to the discretion of discretion and train the experience that to school so that you don't have to come and go oh there's something worse. Yes. And it's very visible when it does all this person saying why do you do your job. Give you some slack job because you told you to take a break. And it also one of the things that I think is really important to understand about the systems is and I'll just talk about public assistance but I think there's parallels to child protective is it's not just used to bring down sanctions on clients. It's also used to bring down sanctions on workers. Right.

[00:09:17] So one of the things they do with this system at the state level is collect information about which office is most efficient at potentially reducing the loads or timeliness or whatever and if you don't hit those numbers then the office gets sanctioned and sometimes financially sanctioned right. So I think of it as like a sanction up sanction down system with case workers really in the middle trying to navigate like doing their job and most caseworkers and child protective workers who I've talked to just really genuinely want to help people. Not all of them but most of them really feel like they're caught in a bind between this kind of statistical reporting and statistical response that they have to do and the actual work that they want to be doing which is you know providing resources and help and support to families. And I think that's quite similar to the sort of debates

we've heard about camps that kind of computer statistics in the NYPD where it created situations where people felt like they had to go out and stop and frisk people and ticket people and arrest people in order to keep their numbers up. Like so in Indiana one of the reasons that so many people got denied for failure to cooperate was the private contractors were trying to hit their timeliness numbers so they were only allowed to spend. This is actually with a hybrid system. So it's probably even different at the time but currently in the hybrid system supposedly they're only allowed to spend seven minutes per case. And they talk about the work as being changed from the sort of professional comprehensive practice to digital piecemeal that they now are doing pieces of cases under very tight constraints and they're sanctioned if they don't hit their seven minute target. And sometimes I haven't verified this yet.

[00:11:02] So I just want to say that this is their stories that people have told me only but from what I hear from the people I'm talking to you get docked if you don't make it to your timeliness numbers like your pay gets docked which is basically just piecemeal. Right. It's the same as making lace collars like in a basket at home like you're just sort of cranking out. And then the incentives are all to just push people through because a denial is fine. It hits your timeliness number like the incentives are not to do comprehensive work there to push people through the system. And I suspect that that had something to do with why so many people got denied. There's even rumors that they were batched nine people just like saying these 20 have to time deal with them hit the button say no to them all. And then if they call tell them to appeal to reapply because that of course moves the financial cost too off the private contractor and onto the state. Right because a fair hearing is not their job a fair hearing it's the state's job so they can save money and hit their numbers and just push the problem sort of down the line. And I'm seeing a lot of that in these systems in different areas and I suspect it might be happening in child protective as well. But I don't know that yet. We'll have to have a phone conversation about what you guys know because I'm trying to figure out what to do child protective in New York State.

[00:12:15] So welfare is an Indiana law enforcements in L.A. I've done a bunch of interviews with chopped active folks in New York State but I have not done sort of journalistic interviews so I have to shift them a bit. So I'm trying to think of what like the big interesting cases here. So I'd love to talk to you about what you think that is. I just ask you to define the phrase digital justice because I think people would be interested to hear how are you. Yeah and there's a couple of really great models for it. One is human rights based model that comes out of an organization called the Detroit digital Justice Coalition. And I'm not going to be able to dredge it up from the back of my brain right now exactly what's in it but basically they see the right to communication as a basic human right as protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And that technology is part of that human rights framework. And so they talk about sort of access is one part of their sort of agenda or their platform. But they also talk about right like safe and healthy communities and the right to communication and expression. And so it's a much more holistic idea of digital justice. There's also if you're specifically thinking about big data systems this sort of algorithmic stuff there's a really great statement called the civil rights principles in an Age of Big Data.

[00:13:35] I think that came out of the Leadership Conference which is a civil rights organization and was signed by the foundation that I work with and the Open Technology Initiative at New America and the NAACP and Color of Change and now and a bunch of other organizations that has five or six principles for thinking about the sort of new data systems and civil and human rights. So they talk about right like stopping digital redlining. And they talk about fairness and fair process in automated decision making and there's a bunch of other things that I can dredge up but I really like that model because it recognizes that these systems are built in a context of racial and economic and gender inequality and that everything is not just all new. So it has a sort of historical consciousness about it like these have been the problems in the past. These will probably be the problems going forward they'll probably look different but these are the kind of things we should keep looking for

redlining right. We should keep looking for unfair decision making. We should keep looking for equal access to public programs. So I think that's a really great model as well. Thank you that's very useful. Thanks. This has been terrific. Oh I really appreciate the invitation Superfund. Talk to folks in social work. I don't get to work with people in social work as often as I'd like to. So it's. And also coming from a welfare rights background I think it's really easy to put caseworkers in the enemy box. And I think that frontline caseworkers particularly are so close in the situation to people who are receiving benefits that are just natural allies in this work. And so I think a lot about like how do we make better coalitions between clients and exactly the opposite of what the governor Mitch Daniels wants. Like how do we make better coalitions. Because we recognize that these are shared problems right.

[00:15:33] That the attack on public workers is the same as the attack on public programs and that it's part of a single attempt and that we need to be on the same side in order to really talk about. It's a little hard to convince folks who are recipients in the movement that this is in their best interests. But you know I think that line is very fuzzy. I think a lot of people and frontline welfare work are working on their grants are working off their benefits. And it's a very fuzzy line and I feel that way about I think unfortunately there's a role that organized labor could play as well in protecting recipients of public services as well as public sector jobs. So I think there's a lot of coalition we could build around this and that we need to build around this between organized labor public employees and recipients of public programs. I think this really is you know I read about it from a perspective. You hear people's stories of how they were so respected and treated when they applied for benefits. One has to ask what happened to the person who was still working there. With is true. So you know it must feel so disempowered and neurosis. The frontline workers. That's right. And our narrative our cultural narrative of like taking taxpayers money for potentially fraudulent but definitely suspicious reasons. Right. That cuts across every level of this case workers believe that recipients believe that politicians believe that.

[00:17:10] So one of the big struggles I think and welfare rights work is to help people reframe their own experience because everyone you talk to is the only person using welfare rights like the only person who really needs it and everyone else is scamming. And then that gets complicated around sort of gender and race stuff and an immigrant status and other things. So there's a enormous horizontal violence in the system and that's caseworkers and recipients and even some like well-intentioned policymakers and certainly the public right. So I think that that's a cultural work we have to do. And I'll say there's a really great book that you guys probably already know by Mark Rank called One Nation under privileged. And I think he's done some really important work to start that conversation because what he does is he looks we tend to look at poverty at a moment in time. So it always looks like this minority issue like maybe it's five percent or maybe it's 10 percent and then we fight over whether it's like 10 and a half or 11 and a half or whatever. And what he does is he tracks people's experience with poverty over their lifetime and people's interaction and use of means tested public services over their lifetime and what he finds is God I think it's 53 54 56 something percent of people in the United States will be under the poverty line at some point in their lives. And 64 percent like two thirds of full two thirds will access means tested public assistance. So that's not like Medicare. That's like Tanoh of food stamps like home heating assistance public housing. And so I think it's really important to say look this is actually a majority issue. This is all of us and we need to stop lying to each other that we can't access public services because two thirds of us have.

[00:18:53] So why is it that we all think like no one has ever done that and we need to start talking about it as something that we all do we need to sort of destigmatize it in that way but it's really challenging it's really challenging to do that work in this political culture. I think in this country it's always you know a group of Christians maybe stir people services. A lot of us are impacted by poverty and it is a structural issue that we know we demonize people who are poor. I think you are

talking about right. What goes across that think you know that's good. Yeah I think one of the many connections with the voter ID laws. I think that's a great connection. Is this idea that fraud is the problem. Right. Like so you know that and this is my understanding of where fraud is at. In public services you guys probably know this better than I do. It's like in food stamps it's about a penny on the dollar in Indiana before the modernization I think the fraud rate was about one point two percent. So it sounds roughly consistent it's about 1 percent. It's about one penny on the dollar. So that effort to get that from point 0 1 2 point 0 0 0 1 or 0. It's like an arms race where there's always going to be some degree of fraud in the systems just like there is in taxes right. But we like go nuclear on fraud in social service system because of these cultural assumptions we have. And it is incredibly costly in terms of just financial resources. Right.

[00:20:33] Like it's very expensive to get to zero percent fraud because it's pretty much impossible because people are really creative and because people know how to game algorithms and but it's also really costly in terms of the human cost of it. Right. And politically it's really costly politically as well which I think is another connection with voter ID. So I think shifting the sort of way we talk about it again is a major cultural shift that we need to do. Where that argument of this is the problem that like 1 percent of people might get 120 dollars cash. Rather than saying look the problem is that our system is stingy stigmatized and not functional because of these cultural values we assign to it. You know I think that's really the work. And I think that's the same as voting fraud like the problem in voting. It's not that people are clamoring to cheat lie to do voter fraud the problem is that people are so disengaged that we have the lowest voter participation in the entire industrialized world. Give or take. And that seems like a more pressing problem to me. And I think the same thing goes for public assistance that I think the 50 percent of people who are eligible for food stamps and do not take them. That's the problem right. The problem is that people will starve rather than ask for food stamps.

[00:21:50] I just seems like a more pressing problem to me like it affects more people like it's more solvable than the sort of antifraud arms race which I don't find interesting really at all except for as something to say that we should stop doing it. No one really knows you. Yeah. Yeah. So spend a ton more so trying to eliminate fraud than we would actually have some mortgage brokers it cost more and more and more Oh yeah. Yeah when I teach I teach a class on public policy and when I teach that class I talk a lot about performative policy making where it's like it's not about whether it's effective or not it's about being seen in a certain way right about being seen to be tough on crime or tough on fraud or it is very popular. We have a political culture that will make you very popular unfortunately. And so it's not about whether it works or not right it's about how you seem to constituents and so there's a lot of work that needs to be done with just us normal folks right. To help people understand what the system really looks like and how it's really used and who really uses it which is why I think rights work is so important. As you just described is a very strong national a lot of the public discourse issues that you're talking about we're really I think a lot of questions. And what the science is and what the reality is what experience is just not the issue is framed in those terms is really moving forward and saying these are my values only disguising them in terms of the reality that general trend is going to go. So yeah it's deeply seated like there is just no getting around how deeply seeded it is in this country and also in lots of other places.

[00:24:01] So like one of the things that I started doing when I was looking in that I was talking about this archival work I was doing about the technological systems and I was like OK so I just need to go back until like the philosophy changes so I can understand what the technical systems were that changed the philosophy so I'll just keep looking at the systems I'll keep going back and I'll see like when the way we thought about poverty as a country changed and I got back to like 1720. So I'd looked at like you know scientific charity and I looked at you know I just kept going back and like I got back to the poorhouse ledger and like not that much had changed. And so that's part of why the new book it's called Digital poorhouses like we just keep recreating the same system and

it's not you know because it's more or less efficient. I don't think I think it's like there's just new ways of creating a very similar system which is one that punishes disciplines and limits the life opportunities of the poor. And I think it's an appalling waste of human resources just appalling waste of human potential. And just think it's criminal it's a criminal waste of human beings. These are values. Absolutely. Yes absolutely. And it's like as Mark Ranck said it's an American it's unchristian. It is against all of our basic values what we propose are all of our basic values and it destroys democracy. I think it's also an important part of that to talk about just the one you made you a while back about everyone you know there's such a large percentage of people who use public assistance.

[00:25:35] But is this exceptionalism. Well I used it for the right reasons. Right. You know everyone else is to steal the system. Yeah that's probably pretty amazing. I didn't get it and say you know this is what this is for. Right. The Chamberlayne. Yeah right. The of shame. Yeah and there's always some kind of like you know counseling you have to do with people to talk them into using public services and I like I don't know how many times I've been like this is what it's for. You know go on unemployment like you like you got fired Belykh and it wasn't your fault. And this is what it's for or laid off fired would make it hard to get in unemployment or like you know you are struggling to feed your child and you were working two jobs and like ask for food stamps and that's what they're for. Like this is what government is supposed to do. And I know that people disagree with me on that. Like that that is not what everybody thinks government is supposed to do. But I believe that part of government's role is to if we have gone all in on capitalism is to help mitigate the worst effects of a system that requires that 5 to 10 percent of the population be disposable. Right. And that's not getting better it's getting worse. And so that's that's our job. So I do a lot of convincing of like you have to use these resources. Right. It's like public transportation right. Like us in many places except for major cities.

[00:27:04] As soon as you cannot use public transportation people stop using public transportation. And then it gets sort of gets kind of tarred with this brush of like only a certain kind of people use public transportation and then we continue to treat it like the ugly stepchild when more people from different places who have the privilege to not use public transportation would use it. It would be politically stronger right. Because it would be harder to like things like the bus riders union I think is like Berl yet like let's support and protect our public services together across lines of race across lines of class. But it really takes people who have a bit more privilege sort of being more aware of why public resources are important than they might be on their own. So it's a movement issue. Weeks ago vote for this was work. There you go. Hi John. What's going to happen to you. Are you just you know to other people do you call your vote this day or is she needs to do more work. What was your question was during the campaign trail. I think it's a really important part of a puzzle actually right about that specifically and in digital that ended my first book because there was a lot of talk coming out of before the bubble burst before the Internet bubble burst about the Internet economy being the economy that was going to lift all boats. Right. And of course is exactly the opposite.

[00:29:25] This is a deeply bifurcated economy where a small number of people who have access to education and the resources to relentlessly sell train can have some really interesting really high discretion really mobile fascinating jobs and everybody else is in the service industry. And when particularly if we won't commit to doubling the minimum wage right. That is absolutely the feeder for public services because if you have a family and you're making eight dollars an hour it doesn't matter how many jobs you have right you're going to need some kind of support even if it's just childcare to get to your three jobs. So that's a huge part of the puzzle is something I try to talk about or like in workshops and stuff like you know we're all responding to the new economy as well. And so I think we also need to continue to have that conversation of what is public services look like. Again if we've doubled down on this our model for economic growth. Right. If our model for

economic growth is like the twenty 25 percent of people who manage to get a four year college degree can do quite well and everybody else is you know working in data centers or fast food or health care then like how do we need to think about how public services needs to respond to that. I think it's a huge huge part of this issue like what's happening to employment. I was just in Muncie Indiana last week doing some research for the Indiana chapter in the book. And I cannot think of a better place to be sort of the poster child for the new economy right. Like it's a college town and there's like a little tiny like very hip Brooklyn downtown right. It's like seven stores in a coffee shop and the rest of the town has just been gutted by the disappearance of there's.

[00:31:08] There was a transmission factory that was there. There was a wire factory that was there and there was a GM plant that were there and they all closed in the last 30 years and people went from having you know union jobs that paid 30 35 40 45 dollars an hour to either being unemployed or to working in the service industry. And that's just a really different world that we live in than we lived in 30 years ago. And we absolutely have to sort of keep Muncie like front and center in our heads. And I think particularly of the folks who are really invested in high tech economic growth don't think about those jobs as being part of the information economy as one of the dead horses I like to be a lot like service work workers the information economy like we have to stop measuring this as if the bottom three quarters of the economy didn't exist. We have to actually measure the whole economy to have a real picture of what that looks like. So I think that's a hugely important part of it. And it's a very volatile economy. You can't make bets about what's going to happen. So and this is huge for issues of gender like the retraining the constant retraining is very very hard for people who are also primary caregivers for families and children and elderly people. So there's a disproportionate effect on women in the information economy particularly working class women. I think I feel most look it mobilisations on the local. And I think that's where it is really happening right now around minimum wage around Black Lives Matter really needs to be local.

[00:32:43] And I don't know how that ultimately will drive Washington but I think it's really global warming is real. We have to start to link the local work well and that has begun to happen. So there is an organization that is like a big hero organization of mine which is the poor people's economic human rights campaign. P. Pirc poor people's economic human rights campaign which was cofounded by Cheri Honkala who is one of the people who started the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in West Philadelphia and she's just amazing and you know she's been arrested 200 times. She like ran for sheriff of Philadelphia on a no evictions platform. She's just like unstoppable great. And this network was formed at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit. That said either Atlanta Detroit or either the first of the second U.S. Social Forum I forget which is a coalition of poor and working folks groups. So welfare rights groups like ours were a member organization. Oh the organization I work with I helped found it's called our knowledge our power. OK Opie is a welfare rights economic justice group. So our group is part of it a lot of sort of homeless action groups are part of a bunch of youth like the hip hop Congress is part of it. There's really just an extraordinary group of organizations who are starting to articulate themselves as poor people's organizations in a way that sort of I find really inspiring right like that poverty in the United States is like a political identity is part of I think that cultural change that needs to happen.

[00:34:14] And there are also just a really extraordinary group because they're very committed to meeting people's basic material needs like so that they're able to organize it reminds me of one of my favorite black panthers things as they did a lot of social programs which many people don't know about so they did help programs they screen for sickle cell. They did free lunch programs they had had crossing guards that help little kids cross a street in Oakland. Right. They did amazing social programs but they called them. It's like social programs while waiting for revolution. So there is this idea that you can't separate the politics of Social Service and the politics of social change and that you actually have to do those things together. And so one of the things I've been super impressed by is like when they went to the Detroit Social Forum they started in Florida. They

brought a contingent of mostly homeless folks all the way to Detroit. They all left with zero dollars in their pockets and supported each other to get all the way to Detroit by talking in churches and all this kind of stuff. Every time I've done any kind of organizing with them you get fed three meals a day. There's always childcare right there. Very very conscious about like people cannot do this work unless you meet their basic material needs and they manage at the same time to be completely radical. Right. Like so they're like What should we do. We should take over all the HUD owned homes in West Philadelphia because they're doing a terrible job and they occupy these homes you know like these abandoned homes.

[00:35:39] So they do this amazingly radical work while still really meeting people where they're at. And like making sure that people are cared for and so there's a kind of healing justice part to it that I find really inspiring. So I'm deeply inspired by the poor people's movement in the United States right now. I don't think it's super visible the national poor people's movement but it's there and it's growing and it's really there are some really extraordinary people. And there's been a couple of signal flags. Right. There's been a couple of things that have gone up and not quite caught the occupier was one. And I think Occupy I mean this this is a controversial thing to say but I think Occupy really foundered on its class stuff particularly around homeless folks as part of the movement. Like there was an amazing opportunity for us to think about what it means to build a coalition across people who have access to the basic resources they need to survive. And the people who do not and we didn't quite get there but it was a better attempt than we've had in 30 years. And I think that that's just the beginning right. I think there's you know big things coming. So I'm very hopeful about that. I'm incredibly hopeful about that. I think of myself as a hard one optimist. Right. Like I find cynicism really easy and optimism really hard work really hard at my activism and networks like the poor people's economic human rights campaign is how I maintain my sort of hardball optimism. They're just brave and smart and an extraordinary people with enormous amounts of integrity.

[00:37:11] You have been listening to the second of a two part discussion on technology and social justice with Dr. Virginia Eubanks. It is our hope that you found enlightening as well as thought provoking. Please join us again as we continue to explore those topics important to social work and in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school or our history or online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work resource center you'll find it under the Community Resources menu.