University at Buffalo School of Social Work
inSocialWork Podcast Series

Public Interest Technology and Social Work

Peter Sobota [00:00:09] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome back to the inSocialWork Podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, it's good to have you along. The social work profession seems to have a tendency to defer or follow developments in technology. What can happen when social workers get involved on the ground floor? And what's lost when we're not at the table? Today on our show, our guests, Doctors Sera Linardi and Soobin Kim, join us for a discussion of public interest technology, which focuses on designing, developing, and applying technology in ways that advance the public good, not simply capitalistic goals. Our guests will describe why it's important for social workers and other like-minded professionals to engage in interprofessional collaboration to address fairness, access, and ethical issues in practice, policy, and service delivery. They'll define what public interest technology is, how it informs the overall processes of attending to the needs of individuals, families, and communities, and give plenty of examples of what outcomes look like when PIT applications are informed by social work values. Soobin Kim, PhD, is a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Georgia School of Social Work. And Sera Linardi, PhD, is associate professor of economics at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Hi, Sera. Hi, Soobin. Welcome to inSocialWork.

Soobin Kim [00:01:41] Thank you for having us.

Sera Linardi [00:01:41] Thank you, thank you, Peter.

Peter Sobota [00:01:44] Oh, we're delighted. Thank you again for agreeing to take the time. We really appreciate that. As we mentioned in the introduction, Soobin is a social worker, partly by training, right? Do I have that right? And I just want to make sure that everybody knows again that Sera is, you know, she is an economist. And she works in public and international affairs. I believe, if I remember correctly, she has a background as a computer scientist. So we're going full multidisciplinary for today's conversation, which fits very much with the topic. So here we go. Are the two of you ready to go?

Soobin Kim & Sera Linardi [00:02:32] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:02:33] All right, so let's not assume that everybody knows what we're talking about. So let's do a bit of a 101 to start. So in the most practical terms, at least for now, what is public interest technology?

Soobin Kim [00:02:51] Yeah, I can go. I'm Soobin speaking. So that's a perfect place to start. So public interest technology, or PIT, is not actually a specific type of tech, like AI or blockchain. Instead, it is the practice of designing, deploying, and governing technology

with a focus on the public interest, social justice, and ethical considerations. So PIT is a broad term. It encompasses a wide range of initiatives that leverage technology for social good. And crucially, it does this through interdisciplinary collaboration. So to give you some practical examples, one side of PIT involves using data science techniques to analyze large data sets to identify inequality in public service delivery. PIT also includes user experience design to enhance the accessibility of government websites. Additionally, PIT includes the digital platforms, databases, and algorithms that assist public sector decision-making. Finally, PIT involves the development of tech policies and regulation that address the social impact of technology and incorporate ethical considerations, specifically by addressing data privacy risks and risk of excluding marginalized communities from technology driven decision making processes.

Peter Sobota [00:04:26] Yeah. All right. Thanks. And so, you know, the next thing I want to ask you is, you know, why social work? You know, I'll ask you that in a second, but, you know, just listening to you is I'm thinking about how technology has kind of developed over the years and as it's been, as it has come out, it seems the pattern is it's very, it's marketed. And it's supposed to help society, like, to serve the public and the social good. It really sounds very romantic, actually, and altruistic and kind. So we don't need... It's already done in the public.

Sera Linardi [00:05:11] Okay, I think I need to, let me give you two related terms, right? So there's responsible technology and then there is public interest technology. So when you think about like responsible technology, this is like, you assume the technology is already out there. It's like technology first. This is when you're thinking about, you know, Google doing responsible AI or like federal agency, right, like trying to govern responsible AI standards, like the National for standards and technology. So there it's like, we're going to do the tech or the tech is already out there, right? Like, how do we do it so it doesn't harm people too badly? Or how do you do it? So that there's still public interest in it. So public interest technology, I think, is like before the tech even, right. It's like there is the question of do we even need tech is in public interest technology, will tech actually harm? So the answer isn't always like... Oh yeah, we're gonna use tech, we are gonna use AI, right? So in that case, like, when you think of responsible tech, you have more of the engineers, like the computer scientists, the data scientists, the lawyers, ethicists. And when you thinking about public interest technology, it's actually modeled after like public interest law. And so it's like activists, social workers, like. We've also engineered social and computer scientists, but like policymaker, artists, storytellers, journalists, right? And the focus is on, are we including people? Are we really hearing the people who we say this is for?

Peter Sobota [00:06:49] Yeah, yeah. And you know, I think sometimes social workers, I'm a social worker, by the way, you know we assume that, you know our values, you, know that we're the only discipline or profession that has these kind of like values that are somewhat, you know, sensitive to vulnerable populations and people who are marginalized. And I, you know, think any thinking person knows that that's not true. But that said, why does social work need to be a player here, specifically, in your opinion.

Soobin Kim [00:07:21] Yeah, so again, Soobin speaking. To put it simply, social work and PIT are mutually beneficial. The term public interest technology might be new to many, but the concept is not entirely foreign to the social work profession. There's a long history of integrating technology into our field to promote social good. You know, like dating back to the late 1970s, when Dr. Walter Lamandola pioneered computer systems for human service organizations. And more recently in 2015, harnessing technology for social good

was officially designated as one of the grand challenges for social work. The social work profession has a track record of utilizing various tools from diverse information and communications technologies, or ICTs, to emerging initiatives involving virtual reality and artificial intelligence. However, as technology becomes a more complex and essential part of daily life, it is vital to actively integrate these advanced technologies into social work practice, education, and research to enhance social justice. And moving one step further, through collaboration with PIT, the social work profession can move beyond being a consumer of technology and instead become an active contributor to technology development. We provide deep expertise in social justice and human rights, which aligns perfectly with the PIT framework for responsible technical development. For example, social workers with PIT literacy can contribute to the design of technology that specifically benefits marginalized populations. They can also serve as monitors, ensuring that technology does not violate human rights. So by working together, social work and PIT fields ensure that advanced technology is not just powerful or profitable. But also equitable and ethically sound.

Sera Linardi [00:09:36] This is Sera speaking. So like, I'm going to give a concrete example to what Suvin is talking about. So, so think about SNAP benefits, right? So, um, there are websites out there that are, um. Um, supposed to help people apply, right. So, and they're, you know, this is, this like applying for benefits. It's a thing that, um people like code for America or like other groups of, um volunteer technologists who wants to help they're like, obviously people need help applying. Let me make a website, let me make an app, right? So a computer scientist or data scientist might know how many pages the SNAP benefits are, right. They might know like what sort of information is required, like the income, the assets, and all that stuff. But something they don't know that I think like social workers know is for example, like how does family dynamics affect who gets determined as a head of household? Like they wouldn't know, right!

Peter Sobota [00:10:33] Yeah, they wouldn't probably ask that question. They wouldn't ask that.

Sera Linardi [00:10:36] A social worker would know that, right? And things like, you know, they've been moving from place to place, maybe the family. So it's like, what kind of computer access do they have? Right? Right? And things, like, for example, are they going to be... Maybe this is a domestic violence situation. So are they are going to able to gather documentation that is necessary for this? And maybe this is going to take them for a long time and so maybe they need to be like saving across the forms through time, right? Maybe they won't if there was a benefits calculator ahead, they would be very intimidated by it, but they look at it and they'll be like, there's no way I can gather all this information. So all this like family dynamics and psychological factors and sort of just like day-to-day challenges that is very real and needs to be accounted for if we're building technology for the marginalized. These are things that I think social workers are best at.

Peter Sobota [00:11:36] Yes, and in the U.S. In 2026, if you are an immigrant to this country, you might want to be careful on how you even are hesitant in how you answer some of the questions on these Yeah, those are great examples.

Sera Linardi [00:11:56] Yeah, can I add to that a little bit?

Peter Sobota [00:11:59] Yeah

Sera Linardi [00:12:00] Yeah, I think also social workers that have studied some public interest technology, we're not trying to turn them into technologists, right? But then they can start thinking about this issue. Social workers are often giving referrals to people about how to access services and they would hear things like, I don't want to access this service because then I'll be in system. Right? So there's always fear from marginalized population that when they give up their data, they don't quite know who they're giving this up to and how it might be used against them. And so a social worker, I feel need to know the answers to this question, right? Like, where is your data going? Is it a federal level data set? Is a state level? Is it just going to be the nonprofit level? Like what are you giving up in terms of access to benefits. By giving up, by not giving up data, right? The privacy access trade-off, I feel is something that a social worker is very, like needs to help their client handle. It's very complex for a disabled person, a senior person, like a member of the marginalized population to think through this very complex trade-offs. And a social worker that spends some time in public interest technology can help them through that.

Peter Sobota [00:13:23] Absolutely. So you mentioned earlier, I think it was you Sera, that you know who the big players were, the professions, the disciplines, it sounds very multidisciplinary, but it made me think of a question that I hadn't thought of, is how did the two of you come to find yourselves working together on this? We don't have to spend a lot of time on this, but how did this happen?

Sera Linardi [00:13:53] So I think around the 2000 people were saying like, we, technology is developing so fast. We don't actually know the consequences of these things. Like you say Peter, people were saying this is for the public good, but then people were like, are you sure? How do I know? And so they say we need to create groups, like a consortium or something where we can think about these unforeseen consequences. And so 2015, there is like this big funding, I think like 18 million or something from like Ford Foundation, MacArthur, Knight Foundation, Open Society. And they give it to a range of organizations that are looking at this like public consequences of technology, like Code for America, like New America, Open Technology Institute. And then by 2019, they create a field called Public Interest Technology. And then there is an organization called PIT UN that is run by New America. It's Public Interest Technology University Network. So a lot of the schools in it have like centers that are related to public interest technology. Like I think Harvard has the Bergman Klein. Cornell has the, has, they have a public interest technology program that, you know, I was a faculty fellow in. And there's also organizations like All Tech is Human. There is EMO, which is equity and access in algorithm mechanism optimization. I used to be the executive director there. So we look at the people in the tech fields like operations research, computer science, economics that want to work with people, the practitioner, like the social workers, the lawyers, the community organizers to build this bridge.

Soobin Kim [00:15:45] And yeah, I can address the second question. So this is more of a like personal kind of story, but you know, I'm a social work person by training. So obviously like I haven't learned or haven't heard of public interest technology throughout my social work education from undergrad to PhD. But then you know like we have a massive um technology like discussion right now like going on right now so I got interested in like technology or but more of a like research side like computational social science kind of thing and then in my last year of my PhD I guess I heard that Sera has a class. On public interest technology and I emailed her saying that oh can I take the class without like credits so can I just audit the class and she said yes so I took her class and while I was taking her class I was I thought like oh maybe we should introduce public interest technology to social work people. So that's why I wrote a paper on teaching node. On

public interest technology and submitted to a JSWE journal of social work education and that paper was accepted and this paper was also presented at a CSWE so that's how we are working together. I'm kind of like learning public interest technology right now so I don't like define myself as a public interest technologist but I try to I hope I can expand this in within the social work field.

Peter Sobota [00:17:33] Yeah, well, I think, you know, Sera has pretty much invited us to, so I think yeah, that makes sense. Well, thank you both for telling that story. I was curious of how these partnerships and collaborations come together. Go ahead, Sera.

Sera Linardi [00:17:47] Can I add a little bit? Yeah. Okay. So this is Sera and I kind of want to like talk a little bit about how I ended up in this field as well. Yeah. Because, you know, when I came to Pitt, I was a behavioral economist. I did experiments on altruism, a lot of personal behavior experiments. I do some field experiments as well with social work, you know, agencies. And then 2020 happened. And I was like, and I saw, you know, there's so much need, right? Like people needed, people, people were pretty, um, so we, we opened a zoom, just a zoom because it was COVID and basically invited community members and students and administrators and everyone to just show up on the zoom and meditate. We had mindful breathing because we were all very, very upset and we weren't, we didn't show nowhere to start. So we just sort of like meditated, we breathed and then we chatted, and then over time there were questions, right? People started asking questions and having needs, at that time policing was a big need and people say, how do we understand our local police and how do you work with them? How do we know what rights we have, what rights they have? And I never thought about that question before, until it was presented to me. And then, um, the question became sort of like a public interest technology question. Like, where are, for example, at that point, the community members wanted contracts, right? Because these contracts have those sort of employment rules. And so they wanted the contracts and they say, I learned, you know, we have 130 municipalities and maybe there's 130 contracts, right? And then the they were very, very small areas and we weren't really clear about all of this and one of our students who was actually a social worker was the one that like told us about people's experience sort of trying to navigate this very fragmented system and they I think we had policy students and we had computer science students and we didn't have social workers. So we didn't really understand the human side of like navigating this fragmented policing system. And the social worker, Blair, was like the person that built a bridge for us and helped us see how these like community needs and this frustration that was in the community was actually something you could build technology for and what that technology should look like. So, um. So it started really from just responding to a need and having, having like a collection of social worker, computer science and community member people sort of lead the, the technology development, the user interface design, the writing of like policy memos that came out of it, the decision of like which community group to include at what point, right? Do we go to their meetings? Do they come to their hour meetings? Do we, and so Um, we sort of just like fell into it by responding to like a real world need. And then from then was when I realized what I was doing was had a name to it.

Peter Sobota [00:21:15] Great stories. It reminds me every year here at UB, we do, in the School of Social Work, we're part of a consortium with other disciplines. I think it's called the Interprofessional, oh gosh, I'm embarrassed at it, but we get together with medicine, nursing, public health, and students. And there are faculty members there as well. And we get a vignette, a case study. And it is wonderful to watch the different disciplines look at it with their unique lens. This is exactly what you were describing. However, I'm pretty sure

we don't have the tech people there, which I think I'm going to make a note of. I'm gonna make a notive. So yeah, so thank you for that. Did you, sir, did you want to say something?

Sera Linardi [00:22:10] Oh, I was just like, we would love to. So, so the center that I ran, Cassie, then got a grant to sort of kind of institutionalize this across pit. It was a data.

Peter Sobota [00:22:22] Yeah, see, that's what needs to happen, right.

Sera Linardi [00:22:25] Yeah and then from that we got the money to to pull together a bunch of like different disciplines for this class this is how this class happened it was for a grant to like create something that brought together all this groups Peter that you were talking about across the university so the first time we taught this class it was like with the honors college with like a multiple units. I think the only problem with that sort of grant is like once because of how universities are structured. Like once the grant is over, people aren't like paid to teach, to cross-talk like that, right?

Peter Sobota [00:23:00] Yeah, it's like a workshop, right? You go and then, yeah, you forget how to do it. So I think you both or one of you hinted earlier, or maybe this is just me, but it's often said that social workers or social work in general, we kind of defer or we tend to be followers when it comes to technology. So if we kind of stopped doing that and we got involved now, what would our unique contributions be? And if you have examples or if you want to talk about that generally, that's entirely up to you. But if we got in on the ground floor, while this is still a relatively new collaborative in a professional enterprise, how could it change?

Soobin Kim [00:23:55] So immediately social work is not currently a major actor in the PIT field. However, there are growing initiatives to integrate advanced technology into the profession. So for instance, some schools have developed virtual reality tools to simulate social work practice experiences. There are also researchers developing AI integrated chatbots for mental health counseling and VR and AI integrated training programs for professionals working with vulnerable populations. And while these endeavors often do not explicitly use the PIT label, they're fundamentally public interest technology. And we, like social work, is a field deeply rooted in social justice. And it is uniquely positioned to inform the technology sector about the real world impact of digital tools on underserved individuals and communities, as Sera mentioned before. And because practitioners work directly with vulnerable populations, our profession possesses deep insight into where technology is most needed and what specific social goods these tools can achieve. Furthermore, social work provides a rigorous monitor for ethical technology use, ensuring that as these systems develop, they remain accountable to human rights and social justice.

Sera Linardi [00:25:28] So I want to just take one area of public interest technology and think about how a social worker could change the entire field, right? So a lot of the tools that you see now are prediction tool, right. We have a limited amount of resource, whether it is like benefits, whether it's like positive or punitive resource, right, like who gets investigated, who gets put in jail, how much should bail be, should I investigate a family for you know, child services, etc. And so these allocation of resources uses AI to determine which members of marginalized populations should be targeted either for benefit or for investigation. So social workers aren't usually part of the decision making this algorithm because it seems very like scary. It was like, oh, I don't have anything but algorithm. I don't want to be part of it, right?

Peter Sobota [00:26:27] Right? No, that's fair. I think that's exactly right. Yeah.

Sera Linardi [00:26:30] Right, but essentially, like, if you run a regression, you know how to work with this, right? So essentially what it is is the machine makes a prediction. Either someone should be investigated and they should be, which is accurate. Someone shouldn't be investigated and the machine says they shouldn't be, right, that's also accurate. Or you have this two kinds of error, which is like you have a false negative. You say, this family, should not be investigated you know for child abuse or something but you actually should or the other way around right like you should they say investigate this family but actually this family is fine so there's a false positive and false negative determining this is a very like i feel like it's a very context specific thing that someone who isn't involved in the day-to-day of the people who are experiencing this thing. It's very easy for them to make something that is maybe optimized for efficiency rather than for you know improvement of of people's lives right so think about like fraud detection and think about a social worker to understand what a disability does to a person right or like what does you know how often does someone look at changing rules and understand that something that was okay a couple years ago isn't okay now or their daughter filled it in for them last year but like the daughter isn't here right now right and and like who knows better how much does it cost someone to for example lose their benefits because they're being investigated and how long it takes them to reestablish that right so what is the cost of a wrong prediction you know either a false negative or a false positive I think a social worker is best positioned to weigh those. And this is something that this is actually something that like the voice of marginalized population should be part of this algorithm determination that they can't be part of this conversation. So I feel like it's almost like a moral imperative for the social worker to be representing them there and being like what you think is efficiency is not it's really not efficient because it's going to take this person six months to reestablish their benefits and meanwhile they might go to an emergency room which is to cost you even more taxpayer money. So we should err on, you know, something. And these are just stuff that I think most of us outside of social work are just not really equipped to see, this very deep lift experience stuff.

Peter Sobota [00:29:06] Yeah, I couldn't agree more. And I would hope, and not that other disciplines can't do this, of course, but, you know, I would help that if there's a social worker at the table, you know the words, human rights is going to get brought up, equity, trauma. Cultural trauma. All of those things are things that supposedly social workers are really good at, and I would hope that they would use that voice when they come to this table, as you mentioned. Yeah.

Sera Linardi [00:29:43] But even Peter, I think even among people who are purely talking about dollars, like economists maybe, a social worker, they're just like, okay, trauma, like, what does trauma mean? Right? Like a social workers is able to translate that into whatever language people need, right? Like if people worry about money, they will say, well, then recover is going to cost more time because trauma will cost more of this and your misprediction will cost this trauma to accumulate, right? Or it's going to cost this much more money. And so they're not only translating the lived experience, they're also translating this sort of like trauma language, this vulnerable language, maybe like dollars and cents. Because they know the process, right, in detail.

Peter Sobota [00:30:28] So okay, I think we're brushing right up against it. So we should just kind of get to it. So let's continue a little bit or dive a little further into what I'll call social work education for a bit. Talk about what we can do to prepare students to be effective in

this arena and I think there's no kind of better place to start with other than with this course that Soobin was talking about that she took a part in and that you've been teaching so I'm curious who signs up for this

Soobin Kim [00:31:05] When I took the class, the class has been offered for two semesters, enrolling 23 students from public affairs, sociology, psychology, education, environmental science, statistics, information science, along with two MSW students and a PhD student. So like two students from social work.

Peter Sobota [00:31:30] Yeah. Wonderful. Environmental science. Wow. That's how wonderful. God, that would be exciting. I would love to teach a course like that. Maybe. We'll see. This isn't really that fair to sum up a course in this way, but I'm going to do it anyway. What do you do in the course? If I asked you, like, what were the big hitters in the course, the core concepts, what exactly are you trying to achieve with the course?

Soobin Kim [00:32:06] The class covered all the foundations of public interest technology. It covered from data-empower racial consciousness to equitable data analysis, visualization. And also, Sera invited a lot of community and city government professionals who are working with PIT in their field. So we were able to meet the field public interest technologist through this class. So it was really good.

Peter Sobota [00:32:44] Well, you know, I'm just curious, sorry, is this a in-person or an online or hybrid course?

Soobin Kim [00:32:53] It was in person when I took the class.

Peter Sobota [00:32:55] In person. Yeah, and it still is, Sera.

Sera Linardi [00:32:57] Yeah, it still is, yeah. The way I would describe it is like, this class is for people who are interested in social justice issue to translate their passion into actionable action. Actionable action. Using technology, right? So people came in already with specific interests, right.

Peter Sobota [00:33:27] Yeah, so they're kind of self-selected but but different lenses, right? Yeah. Sorry. Yeah

Sera Linardi [00:33:35] Exactly. So like, for example, we had students who were in environmental science who was working within an Indian reservation, trying to negotiate data about water quality between the reservation and the army corporate engineer, right? And just navigating all the distrust and like, who should own the data? What should the data be used for? It's very interesting.

Peter Sobota [00:33:59] Yeah.

Sera Linardi [00:34:00] We had students who worked at homeless shelters who were interested in how to provide broadband services to people experiencing homelessness. And then he worked with the local hospital and the local libraries and just think about like how to create some, like a consortium of service providers that would be able to fund this broadband service. We had people who worked, who were in the city government and was concerned about, you know, during COVID, a lot of our, a lot of the government meetings were put online. And she was really concerned about like the. Accidental exposure of private information during these meetings, right? Like people putting up a form and they're

like, oh, if you look at the screenshot of that, you can see this, or people being identified and having their statements be out there forever, right. So how do you, is there a cost-effective way to balance between accessibility of government meetings and exposure of privacy, right, private data. So it's a very large range you know, students coming with their concern. But a lot of them were really, were really translatable into technology just because technology touches everything that we use right now.

Peter Sobota [00:35:27] Absolutely. And so again, in the context of the course, you've got these different folks, different lenses, some common interests. I've taken a 14 or a 15-week semester-long course. So I'm curious in either course evaluations or what happens when people just spontaneously talk. When the course is over, what do your students say about the experience and what happened to them, if anything, as a result of their participation? Of course they were transformed, but go on.

Soobin Kim [00:36:08] And for me personally, it was very eye opening because like, as I mentioned, I haven't heard of public interest technology or I hadn't heard a public interest technology before I took Sera's class. And it was great that I could, you know, I work together and take the class together with people from all over the And they have very different perspectives and also like people had. Very different levels of tech literacy, I would say. And it was very interesting to see their projects and how they apply technology into their projects. It was so eye-opening that I kind of decided to expand this PIT into a social work field.

Peter Sobota [00:36:57] Yeah, I mean, that's all you really need to know there too. I think, you know, as you were talking, Sueven, I was thinking about, you what it's like, at least, you I haven't been all over the place, but I have a feeling this is fairly common. A lot of universities and places like UB and Pitt, which are kind of big, we're kind of, you got all these different perspectives on the campus, but we remain kind of siloed if we're left to our own devices. And it just, it has to be, I know one of my favorite parts of my job right now is I serve on the Faculty Senate. And it's one of the times where I get to talk with everybody across the university. And it, as you said, it's eye-opening to hear how, or to watch and to hear how people approach things. And it always makes the experience richer. I don't know, it's a shame that this silo thing is part of the world that we live in. Sounds like we have to work actively to bust out of it if we're gonna benefit from each other's company.

Sera Linardi [00:38:05] I think, I think the university funding model has something to do with it. Who counts the student who's counted people who are sitting in this class.

Peter Sobota [00:38:14] Oh, gosh. Yeah. Oh, God. All right. Yeah, that's another podcast. We'll say that. That's a different podcast. So for our listeners who are kind of still trying to get their heads around, you know, PIT and especially how it connects with social work. You know, social work has these things called the EPAS, you the competencies. How does PIT fit? The E-pass competencies in social work.

Soobin Kim [00:38:49] Yeah, so PIT is a natural fit for the competencies focused on social justice and engagement with individuals, families, communities, and policy. So we can go over them one by one and provide some examples from Sera's class to show how this works in practice. So first, PIT directly linked to competency two. Advanced Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice, and Competency 3, Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Practice. So PIT addresses the intersection of data and power. It looks at things like racial equity consciousness and the omission of vulnerable communities from mainstream data sets. It also focuses on making data

analysis and visualization more equitable and inclusive. So maybe Sera, could you please give us some examples?

Sera Linardi [00:39:46] In one of our class sessions, we had a self-assessment survey for the students to understand their own positionality and how it affects their ability to, say, run a civic data help desk, right? Who am I? What position do I have? Not just my technical ability, but how do I think about perspectives? And And how aware am I of this? And what kind of skills should I have if I was to be an interface between the vulnerable community and like a data science sort of center?

Peter Sobota [00:40:25] So we're approaching the end of our time together. It went very fast. So here's kind of a strange, broad question that I'm hoping you'll kind of go right after. Is it fair to say we live in interesting times? I'm going to, if that's the most diplomatic way that I can say it. So why does all of this matter, especially now? So what happens when social workers and other disciplines get involved on the ground level? And also, if you're willing to consider the other side of it, if social work holds back, defers, as we sometimes want to do, what is the landscape going to look like? What's going to be the cost of that? What's the landscape going to look like without our involvement? So, actually kind of two questions. What happens when social work gets involved and what is going to the downside if we just lay back?

Soobin Kim [00:41:37] It matters now because technology is developing at a pace that often outstrips our ethical frameworks with tech companies releasing massive new products and AI becoming an inevitable part of daily life. The involvement of social work and PIT is essential for two major reasons. First, social work fills the gap left by profit driven technological development. Currently, much of the tech field is driven by market share and large-scale profits, which can overlook the needs of those on the margins. And when we are involved on the ground floor, it ensures a critical examination of whether the benefits of technology are shared equitably. Without this perspective, there's a significant risk of excluding or further disadvantageous treatment of groups like older adults, racial minorities, and low-income populations. Second, by taking the lead in developing and governing technology, social work can drive innovation from within. This involvement allows for the creation of more time-efficient, cost-effective, and impactful interventions tailored specifically to clients and communities. So ultimately, if these systems are allowed to develop without the input of social work, the resulting technology may lack a human-centered conscious. And by embracing PIT, our profession not only protects vulnerable populations, but also opens a new career path for current and future social workers, positioning them as essential architects of a digital society.

Sera Linardi [00:43:24] Adding to Suvin's point, you know, why now? Because if not now, this is going to be codified. You will be stuck with systems. You will stuck with algorithms that are not what you want it to be, that does not have these voices. And I think with, as well, there is now... A lot of data rescue efforts going in the public policy sector with some federal data sets that has, you know, where we're able to see variables that allow us to track how marginalized populations are doing, like those data sets are disappearing. And if we don't have access to those data-sets anymore, the people who can tell us how this is affecting marginalized population will be the people that are interacting directly with them, which are with the workers, right? So they're kind of the. Like they have to be in now as we're as we are moving more and more of our decision making power to AI agents. They have to just take a deep breath and be like, hey, you know, I actually know enough for this, right? Like I know what the cost is for making a mistake one way or another, either predicting something should not get a benefit when they should or something should get a

benefit when they don't. Right? That sort of trade-off that the rest of us aren't able to see so clearly, just coming in and adding those and being confident that like those are the perspectives that are needed. I think that is an absolutely necessary voice that could really change how systems are developing over time.

Peter Sobota [00:45:08] Absolutely. Yeah, I'm thinking back as both of you are speaking to kind of the introduction of social media and online communities and the promise of offering community and giving people a space to talk. And it's almost like we didn't think about what they would talk about. And what kind of communities they were going to be building. It's that kind of tendency to just roll out the technology and then think about what the implications are, especially the ones that maybe we, are maybe not terribly desirable. So yeah, we kind of have to wrap it up, but if either of you or both of you would like a last word, this would be the time to do it.

Sera Linardi [00:46:00] The involvement of social worker and public interest technology would prevent technological systems from shifting the burden of the state to marginalized individuals, right, those people who are least able to absorb and to rectify issues.

Soobin Kim [00:46:21] I just want to highlight the importance of learning public interest technology among social work students. We have to teach, we have to educate social work students, educate them to be a PIT literate so that we can become a major actor of PIT field in the near future. So that would be my last comment.

Peter Sobota [00:46:52] Thank you so much, both of you, this is really a fascinating conversation. My, you know, my takeaways are my own school, School of Social Work here at Buffalo, we need a course that doesn't exist right now. And I would also like to put forward the induction with full rights and privileges to induct Sera into the social work community and profession. She's got all the right stuff. We would love to have her on board. So thanks to both of you and take care.

Sera Linardi [00:47:28] Thank you.

Soobin Kim [00:47:28] Thank you so much.

Peter Sobota [00:47:33] Thanks again to Sera and Soobin for joining us. The inSocialWork Podcast team serving in the public interest is Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant and guest coordinator who is recovering. Say hi, Ryan. (**Ryan**: Hello). And I'm Peter Sobota. We'll see you next time, everybody.