



AdChoices

**Eric Rice PhD, Contributor**

Associate Professor at USC's School of Social Work

# Forget Killer Robots, AI as a Tool for Social Justice

12/07/2017 10:11 am ET

by Eric Rice and Milind Tambe

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is an ubiquitous part of our daily lives. Particularly and inextricably, AI is linked to our online lives. Your every click and post is being mined by increasingly sophisticated algorithms. Whenever you search for something online, AI is there. AI helps us more successfully navigate real world traffic not just online traffic. And by helping us find information quickly or navigate city streets more effectively, it is easy to appreciate how AI can make our lives better sometimes. And there are some in the tech world who view AI as a panacea, capable of solving any cognitive task given enough time, computing power, and rich enough data sets. As two authors who live in Los Angeles, where the traffic is awful day and night, we certainly will not argue with some of the gains AI can bring to daily life. [Google Maps](#) and Waze have kept us sane on many occasions.

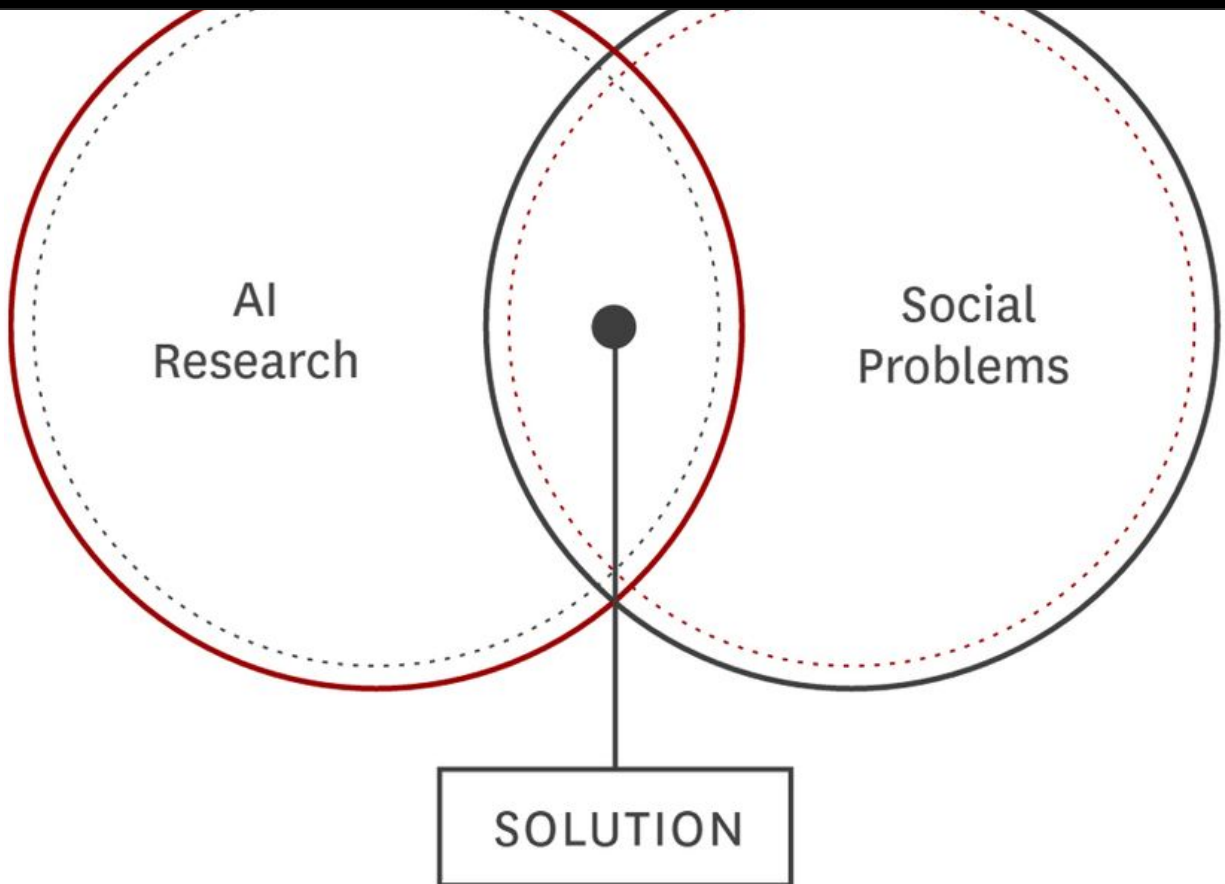
But AI is not always viewed with such a kind eye. Indeed, many in both the scientific community as well as the general public are increasingly concerned about the negative impact that AI may have on society. Some of these concerns, like killer robots may seem like dystopic science fiction fantasies, but weaponized drones guided by AI may not be so far fetched. There are also genuine concerns for job loss, as some traditional white collar jobs may be replaced by algorithms which are “happy” to perform dreary organizational tasks for a fraction of the cost of a human being. Moreover, ethicists, policy makers, pundits and tech billionaires have begun to worry about the future of society, particularly when AI is applied in



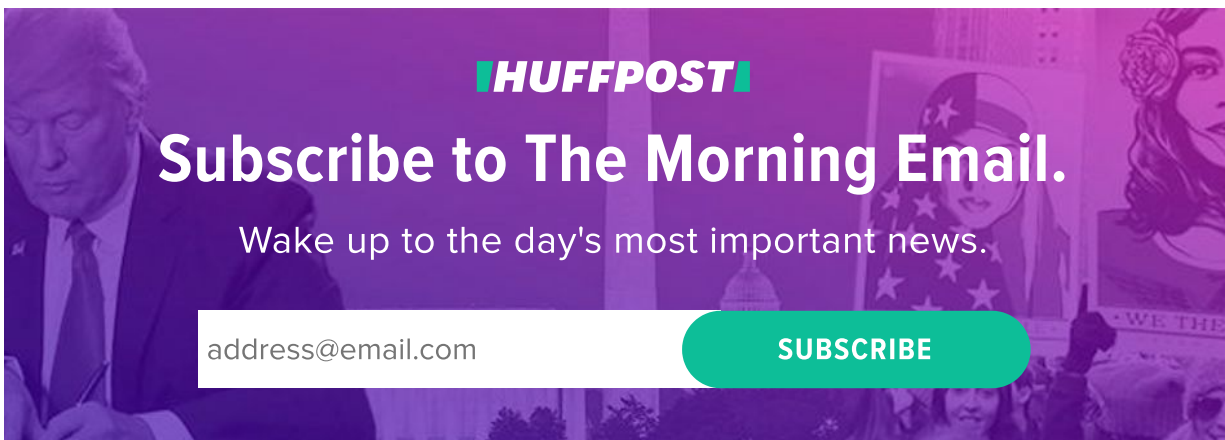
are also sympathetic to these fears and think that they need to be taken seriously.

At USC, we have created a research center, [The USC Center for AI in Society \(CAIS\)](#), that offers a radical shift in perspective. Our center is founded on the idea that AI can be used to improve society and fight social injustice. From our perspective, the vast majority of the persons who benefit from AI currently are people who live with a certain amount of privilege. Largely, this is due to the fact that much of AI is wrapped up in the high-tech economy. Yet, many of the most impoverished parts of the world still struggle with internet access. Even here in the US, the digital footprints of homeless persons, for example, are far smaller than those of us who live in more affluent circumstances. We dare you to imagine how AI can be used to improve the lives of the disadvantaged.

CAIS is one of the first university-based centers focused on AI for Social Good. More importantly it is the first center to deliberately bring together computer science and social work science. CAIS is a joint venture between the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and the Viterbi School of Engineering. Our mission is to conduct research in Artificial Intelligence to help solve the most difficult and complex social problems facing our world.



The complexity of the world can rarely be understood by one single discipline. Creating viable solutions to these complex problems with one discipline stands an even lesser chance. By bringing together social work scientists and computer scientists we can tackle thorny, seemingly intractable social problems in brand new ways. Consider this: if problems such as homelessness, HIV, gender discrimination, substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide were easy to solve, then we would have solved those problems. Right? But the reality is that many social problems are incredibly complex and require equally complex solutions.





This mission requires an engagement by both social work science and computer science. As a field, AI has just begun to consider the role it can have in promoting social good. Similarly, social work has just begun to engage with computer science to enhance the impact of social work science. It is our intention that the research which emerges from this new intellectual space will impact changes in national and international policy, enhance specific social programs, and move toward the creation of a new field of study which merges the technological expertise of engineering with the domain expertise of social work in solving seemingly intractable social problems.

We believe that much of the strength of our work rests in having created an intellectual space in which computer scientists and social work scientists are equal partners, who bring unique knowledge and expertise to the table. From AI come new technologies and approaches, and from social work comes a deep understanding of human behavior and how to intervene effectively in society. As such we see AI for social good as a new trans-disciplinary intellectual space.

If this new area of work seems crazy, we invite you to watch a couple of videos which we have made that document some of our early successes. We also invite you to follow our [website](#) and our [twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) where we are constantly updating our progress on tackling some of the world's toughest challenges. We hope you will be as inspired by these ideas as we are, and we encourage you to join us in our mission to make the world a better place!

HEALER

