

**Ethical Tech Initiative of DC**

**Principal Investigators: Professor Robert Brauneis and Professor Dawn Nunziato  
Grant No.: NVF-PITU-George Washington University-Subgrant-012891-2020-11-18**

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**A. Digital Technology Problems and Policies**

**1. Artificial Intelligence Litigation Database**

A primary objective stated in our grant proposal was to provide other PIT-UN members and the public with useful information in areas in which public interest technology interacted with law. Early on, we realized that there was a major information gap for researchers on artificial intelligence policy: there was no central resource for information on litigation involving predictive algorithms and other artificial intelligence technologies. We therefore decided to create and maintain an online, searchable database of that litigation. We engaged eight student research assistants to be involved in all stages of design and implementation of the database, including seven students from GW's Law School and one student from GW's School of

Engineering and Applied Science. We tested out an initial design for the database fields with about 20 cases. We also considered how we wanted the scope of the database defined, and ended up omitting some patent cases that were peripheral to artificial intelligence policy issues. We also decided that we wanted to track cases from the filing of a complaint, rather than limiting ourselves to cases in which judicial opinions had been published. Once we had the design of the database fields set, we tested several platforms that would allow us to develop a database that could be searched online. We settled on a platform called Caspio, and over several months, constructed the database on Caspio and integrated it into our online blog. We then populated that database with information about approximately 50 cases, and made that database available to the public. We also developed a series of forms that allow researchers to add new cases and update old ones easily. As of this writing, the database contains information on 75 cases, including 38 that are being actively litigated. The database is live and fully functional, and is available to the public at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/ai-litigation-database/>

## **2. Mis- and Disinformation Research**

### **a. Cross-Disciplinary Research and Scholarship**

We have engaged in a vibrant and productive cross-disciplinary partnership with our partners Professor Ethan Porter of GW's School of Media and Public Affairs and Professor David Broniatowski of GW's School of Engineering and Applied Science to research interventions to combat misinformation online. This partnership has proceeded along two interrelated substantive tracks.

#### **i. First Track of Cross-Disciplinary Research: Testing a Novel Intervention**

In one track, our partners are researching the efficacy of a novel intervention meant to reduce belief in, and sharing of, online misinformation. This novel intervention (dubbed the "pivotal intervention") is distinguishable from other efforts to combat misinformation such as news literacy campaigns – which seek to counter users' beliefs in false claims by giving them tools to rely upon when they encounter misinformation – and from accuracy nudges – which subtly remind users of the importance of accuracy. Our partners are testing a more assertive approach. Specifically, their intervention prompts individuals to reflect on their own capacity to make a difference in the fight against misinformation. Rather than subtly "nudging" individuals to be more discerning social media users, or engaging them in laborious pedagogical exercises, as prior interventions have done, our partners' intervention confronts users directly with a succinct, carefully-worded message. Their intervention builds on prior research, dating to before the advent of social media, which makes clear that such assertive tactics can be effective countermeasures against social problems in general and against misinformation and misperceptions in particular.

Our partners have conducted three experiments thus far. In all experiments, some participants were randomly exposed to our partners' intervention, and then asked to evaluate genuine social media posts. The experiments were conducted online on Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform, which facilitates credible, cost-effective social science research. Collectively, these studies have enrolled more than 4,000 participants, representing a broad swath of U.S. residents. The results so far have been very promising:

Study 1 established proof of concept. Participants were randomized to either the treatment or a control group, and then asked to evaluate the veracity of six social media posts, and to indicate whether they would share the posts. Three of the six posts had been fact-checked as false by PolitiFact, a non-partisan fact-checking organization. Compared to control respondents, exposure to the intervention caused respondents to believe the false items less, and to be less willing to share them. (This effect was statistically significant by conventional thresholds.)

Study 2 sought to compare the pivotal intervention with other common interventions. Participants were randomly assigned to either the pivotal intervention; a news literacy intervention; or an accuracy nudge. All participants then evaluated the same content as they had in the prior study. The pivotal intervention was the only intervention to reduce belief in the false items (again, by common standards of statistical significance). However, no interventions were successful at reducing sharing intention, which our partners suspect is likely attributable to a smaller number of participants per tested intervention.

In Study 3, the intervention was tested in a more realistic social media environment. After random assignment to either the intervention, a placebo, or a control, participants evaluated 16 social media posts. Only three had been fact-checked as false by PolitiFact. One had been fact-checked as true. The remaining fourteen were viral, very popular posts at the time the experiment was conducted, as determined by CrowdTangle (a source of Facebook data for academic research). The pivotal intervention caused respondents to be significantly less willing to share the posts fact-checked as false. There were no effects on the non-fact-checked posts, showing that the intervention does not make individuals less willing to share *all* content. However, the intervention also caused respondents to be less willing to share the post fact-checked as true, indicating there are some “spillover” effects of this intervention on innocuous content.

Across studies, the pivotal intervention consistently reduces willingness to share and believe in misinformation. Our partners are planning two future studies. First, our partners will evaluate whether the effects of the intervention endure beyond immediate exposure: If people are exposed to the intervention one day, will they still be affected by it a week later? Second, our partners will map the contours of the “spillover” effect described above. Under what circumstances does the intervention affect innocuous content?

## **ii. Second Track of Cross-Disciplinary Research: Interventions Based on “Gist”**

In the second track, our partners are researching the efficacy of, and new computational measures for, interventions based on *gist* – a psycholinguistic construct capturing the bottom-line meaning of information. Their specific hypothesis is that misinformation communicating a clear gist is more likely to be shared, whereas fact checks communicating clear gists will reduce online sharing. This intervention builds on several decades of prior research, which have shown that gist-based messages are strong predictors of decision-making under uncertainty in fields as diverse as medical decision-making, legal reasoning, and metaphor comprehension.

Our partners have conducted four studies in this second track thus far. In the first study, they used an established gist inference score to show that articles containing gists were more likely to be shared. They next developed a new, Python-based open-source computational tool,

GIPSy, designed to automatically measure the ease with which a human reader could infer a gist representation. They were able to use this tool to replicate and extend prior gist inference scores. They validated this tool against a dataset of news articles about vaccines, showing correlational results indicating that articles containing a higher gist score were more likely to be shared on Facebook. Our partners have also conducted a series of human-subjects studies:

Study 1 developed a series of reliable psychometric measures to measure self-reported perceptions of whether misinformative articles online were a) true; b) lying; c) made sense. Surprisingly, results indicate that subjects could agree that a story was lying but still true. One possible explanation for this seemingly contradictory finding is that subjects consider articles to be factually inaccurate (i.e., lying) yet expressing a bottom-line meaning, or gist, that is true. These results call into question existing measures of truth judgments that are widely used in experiments on misinformation and demand future research.

In Study 2, our partners examined whether articles with higher gist scores were more likely to be shared. They examined two misinformative articles – about HPV and cannabis – and obtained correlational results showing that subjects were more likely to express an intent to share these articles if they thought they were true; however, replicating the findings in Study 1, there was no effect on sharing if the subjects thought the article was lying. One potential explanation is that subjects’ truth judgments actually index plausibility whereas “lying” judgments might index judgments of specific facts, while not taking into account the broader narrative. Our partners also found that subjects who correctly interpreted the articles were less likely to share them. In other words, people were more likely to share misinformative articles if they misunderstood them. Similarly, people were less likely to share these articles if they felt that they understood them. This provides some support for the hypothesis that online sharing may be due, in part, to a misunderstanding of what misinformative articles say.

In Study 3, our partners conducted a randomized controlled experiment where they examined whether explicitly providing the gist of why the cannabis article was misinformative might reduce sharing, when compared to two different control conditions (a simple debunk and a detailed, but difficult to comprehend, “verbatim” condition). They found that providing the gist did indeed significantly reduce likelihood of sharing online, as long as they specified that the fact-check would not be shared with the article. When they specified that the article would be shared together with its fact-check, there was no change in online sharing. This has two direct implications for fact-checking interventions online: 1) fact-checks are more effective if they communicate the gist – or bottom-line meaning – of why a specific article is misinformative; 2) people may not be deterred from sharing misinformation if they believe that a fact-check will accompany the misinformative article.

Our partners expect that at least one peer-reviewed research article in either a psychology or cross-disciplinary journal will result from these findings.

#### **b. Co-PI Dawn Nunziato’s Research and Scholarship**

Co-PI Dawn Nunziato served as a panelist at a symposium at the U.C. Davis Law School on misinformation on social media and in connection with that symposium researched and published a full-length law review article on combating misinformation on social media. In *The Varieties of Counterspeech and Censorship on Social Media*, 54 U.C. Davis L. Rev. 2491 (2021),

publicly available at <https://lawreview.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/54/5/symposium/nunziato.html>, she analyzes the major social media platforms' experimentation with a variety of approaches to address the problems of political and election-related misinformation on their platforms – and the extent to which these approaches are consistent with First Amendment values. In particular, this Article examined what the major social media platforms are doing to facilitate, develop, and enhance counterspeech mechanisms on their platforms in the context of major elections and how closely these efforts align with First Amendment values.

### **3. Roundtable on Algorithms, Consumer Protection, and Government Accountability**

On November 15, 2021, we held a roundtable on “Algorithms, Consumer Protection, and Government Accountability: Legal Issues and Careers.” The roundtable participants included

- **Aurélie Mathieu**, Assistant Attorney General for Policy and Legislative Affairs, DC Office of the Attorney General;
- **Christine Bannan**, Policy Counsel, New America Open Technology Institute;
- **Ben Winters**, Counsel, Electronic Privacy Information Center; and
- **Calli Schroeder**, Global Privacy Counsel, Electronic Privacy Information Center.

Devin Sullivan, Ethical Tech Initiative research assistant and second-year law student, served as moderator. Video of the Roundtable is available at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/>, and on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/gAxlprvMTjs>.

### **4. Roundtable on COVID Disinformation’s Effect on Communities of Color**

On March 23, 2022, we held a roundtable on “COVID Disinformation’s Effect on Communities of Color.” The roundtable participants included

- **Brandi Collins-Dexter**, Former Senior Campaign Director for Color of Change and Visiting Fellow at the Harvard Shorenstein Center, and
- **Craig Silverman**, Propublica Reporter, Inaugural Knight Fellow at the Institute for Data, Democracy and Politics, and Former Media Editor at BuzzFeed News.

Garrett Dowell, Ethical Tech Initiative research assistant and second-year law student, served as moderator. The panel discussion was presented as a hybrid event, which panelists and audience members could join either in person or online.

### **5. Combating COVID-19 Vaccine-Related Misinformation on Social Media and its Impact on Communities of Color**

In an effort to combat the harmful effects of COVID-19 vaccine-related misinformation on social media, particularly as such misinformation impacts communities of color, we engaged in a partnership with GW Milken Institute School of Public Health Professor Lorien Abrams and the [Health Communication Volunteer Corps](#). Our student research assistants partnered with the Health Communication Volunteer Corps to provide expert advice on how to use Twitter’s Birdwatch program to combat COVID-19 vaccine-related misinformation on social media, with a focus on its impact on communities of color.

Co-PI Dawn Nunziato delivered a presentation on “The Role of Social Media Platforms in Regulating Medical Misinformation” at a Howard University symposium on *Challenges and Legal Implications of Misinformation in Health Disparities and Health Policies Affecting Minority Groups in the U.S.*

## 6. AI Speaker Series

In conjunction with co-PI's Robert Brauneis's course on "Law in the Algorithmic Society," we hosted a series of speakers on topics related to the ethics of artificial intelligence throughout the Spring 2022 semester. Speakers included:

- **Catherine Aiken**, Georgetown University, "The OECD Framework for the Classification of AI Systems"
- **Talia Gillis**, Columbia Law School, "The Input Fallacy"
- **Rhema Vaithianathan**, Auckland University of Technology, "AI and Child Welfare"
- **Elisa Jillson**, Federal Trade Commission, "AI and Consumer Protection: the Federal Trade Commission's Role"

## 7. Tech Policy Series: AI Fairness and Transparency

On March 24, 2021, co-PI Robert Brauneis participated in a panel discussion on "AI Fairness and Transparency," moderated by Professor Rebekah Tromble, Director of the George Washington University's Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics. That discussion was broadcast as a webinar and is publicly available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTNUUbKtL4I>

### B. Using Technology to Reach Legally Underserved Populations

#### 1. Providing Legal/Paralegal Education to Incarcerated Persons

In 2021 and early 2022, we researched and laid the groundwork for two components of our project to provide legal/paralegal educational resources and instruction to incarcerated persons.

First, we conducted extensive discussions with Brian Hill, CEO of Edovo and one of our Distinguished Visiting Technologists, to learn about what type of education would be most valuable to incarcerated people and how we could partner with Edovo and employ its technology to make such legal/paralegal education widely available to incarcerated people. We learned that incarcerated people were keenly interested in paralegal education. We also learned that Edovo has provided incarcerated people throughout the Bureau of Prisons system in the U.S. with tablets through which they are able to access educational content. We have worked extensively with Edovo to understand how the content of our legal/paralegal classes should be organized, recorded, and chunked to optimize learning efficacy.

Second, we reached out to Professor Toni Marsh, head of GW's Paralegal Studies Program who has provided paralegal education to underserved communities throughout the world, to form a partnership with her and to invite her to serve as a Distinguished Visiting Technologist.

Third, we engaged GW Paralegal Studies Professor Maya Brown to develop an Introduction to American Law course to be taught/deployed in two forums/platforms: (1) an asynchronous course to be recorded and made available via the Edovo platform on tablets for incarcerated people throughout the U.S. Bureau of Prisons system; and (2) a live, synchronous course to be offered to incarcerated people at the District of Columbia Department of Corrections

(DC DOC). We want to offer a live, synchronous course in part so that we can ensure we are getting input on content and teaching methods from members of the community we want to reach -- incarcerated persons. In order to make this course available at the DC DOC, we also engaged in substantial (protracted) discussions with various directors at that organization and were able to successfully negotiate a Memorandum of Agreement with that organization. As a result, the Introduction to American Law course will be taught in late Spring 2022 by Professor Maya Brown to incarcerated persons at the DC DOC, and Professor Brown's lectures will also be recorded and made available via the Edovo platform on tablets for incarcerated people throughout the U.S. Bureau of Prisons system.

## 2. Distinguished Visiting Technologists Specializing in Access to Justice Technology

Over the course of the year, we hosted four Distinguished Visiting Technologists who specialize in access to justice technology:

- **Jason Tashea**, *Product Manager at Quest for Justice*, an organization that creates access-to-justice platforms to enable self-represented individuals to navigate the civil justice system more effectively;
- **Brian Hill**, *Founder and CEO of Edovo*, an organization at the forefront of ethical prisoner communication and educational technologies;
- **Miguel Willis**, *Innovator in Residence, Future of the Profession Initiative & Executive Director, Access to Justice Tech Fellows*, a national nonprofit organization that develops summer fellowships for law students seeking to leverage technology to create equitable legal access for low-income and marginalized populations; and
- **Toni Marsh**, *Director of GW Paralegal Studies; Associate Professor*. Professor Marsh is the founding director of the George Washington University paralegal studies master's degree and graduate certificate programs, and an associate professor of Paralegal Studies.

These Distinguished Visiting Technologists helped us understand problems related to and solutions regarding the use of technology to provide access to justice to marginalized communities, including incarcerated people, and specifically, to develop and provide legal and paralegal educational resources and instruction to incarcerated persons. Each Distinguished Visiting Technologist participated in one or more roundtables. We also were able to consult with them on an ongoing basis as we started to develop our strategy to provide legal and paralegal education to incarcerated persons, both in-person and via the Edovo platform. We have been working with Edovo, Brian Hill's organization, to learn how to use its platform to distribute educational content on secure tablets to incarcerated persons across the United States.

## 3. Roundtables

### a. How Tech Can Improve Access to Justice

On March 22, 2021, we held a virtual roundtable entitled "How Tech Can Improve Access to Justice: Challenges and Opportunities." The roundtable's initial premise was that poor, minority and marginalized communities are ill-served by the civil and criminal justice systems. We gathered leading experts in the field of justice tech to explore whether there are technologies that can provide such communities with greater access to the justice system. We also asked the experts to discuss how law students and lawyers can get involved in tech access to justice projects? The roundtable was moderated by co-principal investigators Robert Brauneis and Dawn Nunziato and featured the following experts:

- **Miguel Willis**, Innovator in Residence, Future of the Profession Initiative, University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, and Executive Director, Access to Justice Tech Fellows Program
- **Jason Tashea**, Product Manager, Quest for Justice
- **Tanina Rostain**, Professor of Law, Georgetown Law, and Co-Director, Justice Lab
- **Jared Fishman**, Executive Director, Justice Innovation Lab
- **Don Braman**, Associate Professor of Law, GW Law, and Senior Social Scientist, The Lab@DC

Video of this roundtable is publicly available on the Ethical Tech Initiative blog at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/> and on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/XwDwaggSiHU>.

#### **b. Access to Civil Justice and the Role of Technology**

On October 13, 2021, we hosted another access to justice roundtable, focused specifically on the civil justice system (rather than the criminal justice system) and how technology might help facilitate access to the civil justice system for marginalized and underserved communities. This roundtable was moderated by Ethical Tech Initiative research assistant and third-year law student Joseph Caputo and featured the following experts:

- **Eduardo Gonzalez**, Projects Manager, Self-Represented Litigation Network
- **Shirley Horng**, Sr. Staff Attorney, Legal Aid Society of DC; Co-chair of the Public Interest and Courts Community of the D.C. Bar
- **Toni Marsh**, Distinguished Visiting Technologist, Ethical Tech Initiative of DC; Associate Professor; Director, GW Paralegal Studies
- **Jessica Steinberg**, Associate Professor of Clinical Law at GW Law
- **Miguel Willis**, Distinguished Visiting Technologist, Ethical Tech Initiative of DC; Innovator in Residence, Future of the Profession Initiative at Penn Law

Video of the Roundtable is available at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/>, and on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/0Pj2RSBUcU0>.

#### **4. Access to Justice Tech Fellows Program**

We have become a Partner Law School with the Access to Justice Tech Fellows Program, a non-profit organization designed to equip the next generation of civil justice leaders to ensure equitable access to justice for all. In Summer 2021, we provided and funded one Tech Fellow in connection with the Program, under the supervision of embedded Distinguished Visiting Technologist Miguel Willis. That Tech Fellow, Joseph Caputo, one of our student research assistants and a rising second-year law student, was placed with the Self-Represented Litigation Network. Through Joseph's work with the Self-Represented Litigation Network, we were able to develop connections with the Network and to have its Projects Manager, Eduardo Gonzalez, participate in one of our roundtables. Our partnership with the Access to Justice Tech Fellows Program, initiated with funds from this grant, has been productive and has expanded. In the summer of 2022, we will provide and fund four Tech Fellows in connection with the Program (which will be partly funded through our other NVF grant, the Public Interest Technology Commons of DC).



### C. Student Engagement / Interdisciplinary Efforts / Resources Contributed

Below we summarize and reflect on our record of student engagement, interdisciplinary efforts, and resources contributed.

- 1. Student Engagement.** We have hired and have been working with a total of 15 student research assistants – 14 law students and one student from the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences – whom we have introduced to public interest and access to justice projects and who have responded energetically and enthusiastically. We established a weekly team meeting with our research assistants to build a sense of community and to ensure that projects were on track. We have given students significant responsibility. Our student research assistants – with our guidance, supervision, and support – have organized and moderated three of our four roundtables. They have also been working directly on designing an online course for incarcerated persons and on recording, directing, and supporting the instructor who is providing recorded lectures as part of that course. Our student research assistants have also been working on designing and populating the AI Litigation Database. We count the level of student engagement that we have been able to achieve as one of our greatest successes. Three of our students appear in an episode of the PIT-UN series “5 Questions With,” entitled “The George Washington University’s Ethical Tech Initiative of DC,” which is publicly available at <https://youtu.be/rTZAU8n-fSU>
- 2. Interdisciplinary Efforts.** As a direct result of this grant, co-principal investigators Robert Brauneis and Dawn Nunziato, both of whom are Professors of Law, have met and worked closely with Professor David Broniatowski of the School of Engineering and Applied Science and Professor Ethan Porter of the School of Media and Public Affairs, including on their research on mis- and disinformation, sponsored by this grant. We have also worked closely with Professor Lorien Abrams of the Milken Institute of Public Health. We also both became Fellows at the University’s Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics, which put us in contact with academics from other fields who are working on some of the same problems. We have had both lawyers and non-lawyer technologists involved in our roundtables. And we have hired as a research assistant a student from the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences as well as students from the Law School. Lawyers, technologists, and researchers in other fields do not always speak the same language, but our experiences have taught us a lot about perspectives from other disciplines and about how to engage in successful cross-disciplinary partnerships.
- 3. Resources Contributed.** Our AI Litigation Database is available to researchers worldwide, as are videos of three of our roundtables. We are developing a course on Introduction to American Law that will be available to incarcerated persons across the country.

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**Copies of Publications or Media Generated as a Result of the Project**

1. Kristen Mitchell, *Three GW Research Initiatives Awarded PIT-UN Funding*, November 13, 2020, GW Today, available [here](#) and attached
2. Kristen Mitchell, *GW Initiative Supporting Equitable Access to Technology Expands*, November 22, 2021, GW Today, available [here](#) and attached
3. Mary A. Dempsey, *Beyond the Classroom: GW Law Faculty Apply Their Expertise To Pressing Legal Issues*, GW Law Magazine (not yet available; forthcoming Summer 2022)



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# Three GW Research Initiatives Awarded PIT-UN Funding

*These interdisciplinary collaborations will provide opportunities for students to explore careers in public interest technology.*



November 13, 2020

By Kristen Mitchell

George Washington University faculty will develop and support three cross-disciplinary, collaborative research initiatives that center on using technology for public good after receiving funding from the [Public Interest Technology University Network \(https://www.newamerica.org/pit/\)](https://www.newamerica.org/pit/) (PIT-UN). The university joined the PIT-UN partnership, dedicated to growing a new interdisciplinary field around public interest technology, earlier this year.

[GW is one of 36 colleges and university \(https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/gw-joins-university-network-advance-public-interest-technology\)](https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/gw-joins-university-network-advance-public-interest-technology) partners in the PIT-UN. Its aim is to place people, especially those most vulnerable or marginalized, at the center of technology development and grow a new generation of civic-minded technologists and digitally-fluent policy leaders. The GW PIT-UN group, led by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Susan Aaronson, a research professor in the Elliott School of International Affairs and director of the [Digital Trade and Data Governance Hub \(https://datagovhub.elliott.gwu.edu/\)](https://datagovhub.elliott.gwu.edu/), submitted three proposals for funding—all of which were accepted. The awards were [announced \(https://www.newamerica.org/pit-un/press-releases/public-interest-technology-gets-boost-major-foundations-invest-25-universities/\)](https://www.newamerica.org/pit-un/press-releases/public-interest-technology-gets-boost-major-foundations-invest-25-universities/) at the PIT-UN Virtual Convening last week.

Here are the projects that were funded:



## Supporting the Next Generation of Coders

The university received funding to support [GW Coders](https://gwcoders.github.io/studyGroup/#who-we-are) (<https://gwcoders.github.io/studyGroup/#who-we-are>), an initiative launched earlier this year to create a community for programmers across schools. This network aims to encourage GW students of all backgrounds and disciplines to learn how to code and to help forge cross-disciplinary connections between students and faculty.

The group is led by [John Helveston](https://www.seas.gwu.edu/john-helveston) (<https://www.seas.gwu.edu/john-helveston>), assistant professor in the School of Engineering and Applied Science, and [Ryan Watkins](https://gsehd.gwu.edu/directory/ryan-watkins) (<https://gsehd.gwu.edu/directory/ryan-watkins>), a professor in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development. The group will use the PIT-UN funding to launch a scholarship and internship program primarily for undergraduate students. The scholarship program will support underrepresented students in tech and non-STEM fields, covering the cost of tuition for their first coding class at GW.

“Coding is a general skill that’s useful for anybody. Every student in any degree could benefit, I think, from having a little bit of coding practice,” said Dr. Helveston, principal investigator on the project. “In the future that’s going to become more and more important.”

GW Coders also will use the funding to launch a paid internship program to match undergraduate programmers with both STEM and non-STEM faculty members across the university who need coding support for their research projects.

“A bunch of researchers need coding support,” Dr. Helveston said. “There’s a lot of research going on where if they had a student who could help them with this one coding piece, they would be able to get this research off the ground.”

## Connecting D.C. Students: Collaborations, Not Competition

GW received funding to support the PIT Foundry of DC, a regional multidisciplinary collective of institutions from local universities that aims to connect students who are interested in public interest technology law with job placements and opportunities, regardless of which university they attend. This effort seeks to pool resources that will help students network and find positions in the field, ultimately diversifying and expanding the career pipeline.

[Dawn Nunziato](https://www.law.gwu.edu/dawn-c-nunziato) (<https://www.law.gwu.edu/dawn-c-nunziato>), the William Wallace Kirkpatrick Research Professor at GW Law and principal investigator on the project, said it’s time for universities to collaborate more to meet the pressing issues of our time. Institutions of higher education often view one other as competitors in a zero-sum game, she said, but in fields that have traditionally been more exclusive and less diverse, this exacerbates existing access and equity challenges for students.

“It’s important for students to start with a collaborative model and find others in D.C. with whom they share interests to start building these partnerships,” she said. “Not seeing other interested students as competitors but as potential collaborators.”

Ms. Nunziato is working closely on this project with co-principal investigator [Robert Brauneis](https://www.law.gwu.edu/robert-brauneis) (<https://www.law.gwu.edu/robert-brauneis>), GW Law's Michael J. McKeon Professor of Intellectual Property Law. The team will use the PIT-UN funding to place students in experiential learning partnerships and externships with public interest technology employers and host virtual professional events for students. Both faculty members are affiliated with [GW's Institute for Data, Democracy and Politics](https://iddp.gwu.edu/team) (<https://iddp.gwu.edu/team>).

### **Promoting Ethical Technology**

Mr. Brauneis and Ms. Nunziato also received funding to form the Ethical Tech Initiative, a collaboration that brings together GW's experts in law, computer science, engineering, media and public affairs to address issues involved in the societal impacts of digital technology.

The Ethical Tech Initiative promotes privacy, fairness, inclusivity and free speech values in digital technology, beginning by focusing on algorithmic decision making and misinformation, said Mr. Brauneis, principal investigator on the project. The initiative aims to examine the values that digital technologies implicitly embody and reflect, and the values that they should be built or redesigned to support. Mr. Brauneis' research interests include how artificial intelligence is changing the way governments and private companies make decisions.

The Ethical Tech Initiative will bring in guest technologists to interact with faculty and students, lecture and participate in roundtables on issues such as manipulation through disinformation and the values implicit in algorithmic decision making. The initiative will also launch a research project with colleagues from SEAS and the School of Media and Public Affairs on the efficacy of a variety of methods for combatting disinformation. Student researchers from GW Law and other graduate-level programs will study fact checking and labeling of disinformation communications on social media and ultimately write a paper on their findings.

"Through student involvement with these projects, we hope to nurture a new generation of ethical tech natives who are equipped with the tools necessary to understand the values that are embodied within digital technologies," Mr. Brauneis said.

## **News**

[GW Joins University Network to Advance Public Interest Technology \(/gw-joins-university-network-advance-public-interest-technology\)](#)

May 15, 2020

University will prepare a new generation of leaders to recognize and consider the societal implications of new technologies.



<https://gwtoday.gwu.edu>

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# GW Initiative Supporting Equitable Access to Technology Expands

*The Ethical Tech Initiative of DC received renewal funding from the Public Interest Technology University Network.*



November 22, 2021

By Kristen Mitchell

The [Ethical Tech Initiative of DC \(https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/\)](https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/), a George Washington University collaboration that brings together GW's experts in law, computer science, engineering, media and public affairs to address issues involved in the societal impacts of digital technology, is preparing to launch a new push to provide access to justice and educational technology to incarcerated persons in the District of Columbia.

The Ethical Tech Initiative (ETI) aims to advance values of fairness, content integrity, privacy, due process and transparency within widely deployed technologies. It also will develop technological solutions to provide access to justice in the context of civil actions and educational resources to marginalized and underrepresented communities, including incarcerated persons and other self-represented litigants.

It is co-directed by [Dawn Nunziato \(https://www.law.gwu.edu/dawn-c-nunziato\)](https://www.law.gwu.edu/dawn-c-nunziato), the William Wallace Kirkpatrick Research Professor at GW Law, and [Robert Brauneis \(https://www.law.gwu.edu/robert-brauneis\)](https://www.law.gwu.edu/robert-brauneis), GW Law's Michael J. McKeon Professor of Intellectual Property Law.

The ETI received more than \$135,000 in [renewal \(https://www.newamerica.org/pit-un/about/network-challenge/\)](https://www.newamerica.org/pit-un/about/network-challenge/) funding this semester from the Public Interest Technology University

Network (PIT-UN), which [supported \(https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/three-gw-research-initiatives-awarded-pit-un-funding\)](https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/three-gw-research-initiatives-awarded-pit-un-funding) its founding in fall 2020. GW joined the PIT-UN network last year as one of [36 colleges and university \(https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/gw-joins-university-network-advance-public-interest-technology\)](https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/gw-joins-university-network-advance-public-interest-technology) partners dedicated to growing a new interdisciplinary field around public interest technology.

During its first year, the team brought in distinguished visiting technologists to help determine where they could have the most impact and held [roundtable discussions \(https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/\)](https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/) on the role of technology in access to justice.

Distinguished technologists included director of the [Access to Justice Tech Fellows \(https://www.atjtechfellows.org/\)](https://www.atjtechfellows.org/) Miguel Willis (<https://www.law.upenn.edu/faculty/willism1>), Brian Hill of [Edovo \(https://www.edovo.com/\)](https://www.edovo.com/) and [Toni Marsh \(https://www.cps.gwu.edu/toni-marsh\)](https://www.cps.gwu.edu/toni-marsh), founding director GW's paralegal studies master's degree and graduate certificate programs.

In its second year, Ms. Nunziato and Mr. Brauneis are focused on improving access to justice and educational technology for underrepresented groups, especially incarcerated persons, starting with individuals in the custody of the D.C. Department of Corrections. This includes deploying “educational content that will engage incarcerated persons and prepare them for productive lives, both while they're still in prison and when they get out,” Mr. Brauneis said.

The ETI has a short-term goal to provide paralegal educational content and course modules to incarcerated individuals, starting with the D.C. Department of Corrections, through a partnership with Ms. Marsh and GW's Paralegal Studies program. The team aims to ultimately expand this work to the Federal Bureau of Prisons through the partnership with Mr. Hill.

Incarcerated people have extremely limited access to communication and information, Ms. Nunziato said. This was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when visitation was restricted and prison libraries closed. “Our hope is that with the use of technology we can provide education to those who are, in some ways, in most need of it,” she said.

The ETI is also focused on researching and engaging in efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation online, including information related to the COVID-19 vaccine. This includes a collaboration with [David Broniatowski \(https://www.seas.gwu.edu/david-broniatowski\)](https://www.seas.gwu.edu/david-broniatowski), associate professor at the School of Engineering and Applied Science and [Ethan Porter \(https://smpa.gwu.edu/porter-ethan\)](https://smpa.gwu.edu/porter-ethan), assistant professor at the School of Media and Public Affairs, both of whom are affiliated with [GW Institute for Data, Democracy and Politics \(https://iddp.gwu.edu/\)](https://iddp.gwu.edu/), to research efficacy of different interventions for combating misinformation. Additionally, the ETI collaborates with Professor [Lorien Abroms \(https://publichealth.gwu.edu/departments/prevention-and-community-health/lorien-abroms\)](https://publichealth.gwu.edu/departments/prevention-and-community-health/lorien-abroms) and the Milken Institute School of Public Health's [Health Communication Volunteer Corps \(https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/gw-students-mobilize-counter-covid-19-misinformation-social-media\)](https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/gw-students-mobilize-counter-covid-19-misinformation-social-media) to use Twitter's pilot [Birdwatch \(https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/product/2021/introducing-](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2021/introducing-)

[birdwatch-a-community-based-approach-to-misinformation](#)) program to combat COVID-19 vaccine related misinformation on social media, with a focus on its impact on Latinx communities and Spanish speakers.

Tackling multifaceted technological problems requires cross-disciplinary collaborations, Ms. Nunziato said. GW Law faculty bring a theoretical perspective on preserving free speech while combating misinformation, and knowledge about how the court system might respond to changing laws or regulations, but there are no easy solutions to complex challenges.

“We need computer scientists to help understand how the bots are polluting our free speech ecosystem and how to effectively combat that. We need political scientists and data scientists to help run experiments. We need law professors who can weigh in on values of free speech and democracy,” Ms. Nunziato said. “It's really hard to do meaningful cross-disciplinary work when we're not used to talking to one another, but we've been fairly successful in these efforts so far, and we're going to continue with these efforts.”

The ETI is also focused on identifying the ethical and policy issues raised by artificial intelligence (AI). In the past year, researchers created an online, searchable [database](#) (<https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/ai-litigation-database/>) of information about ongoing and completed litigation involving artificial intelligence, including machine learning. The database encompasses legal cases about algorithms used in everything from hiring to criminal sentencing decisions to liability for accidents involving autonomous vehicles.

Researchers track these cases to advance the values of transparency, fairness and anti-discrimination in machine learning. AI makes predictions about the future based on information gathered about the past—this presents a challenge when past decisions were rooted in discrimination, Mr. Brauneis said.

“AI is going to imitate bias wherever it finds it, and that's an issue that is going to remain very important in the future,” he said. “By tracking litigation about that issue, we can make sure we understand all the areas which are coming up.”

The ETI will host a visiting speaker series focused on AI policy in the spring. The series will be coordinated with Mr. Brauneis’ “Law in the Algorithmic Society” course.

## News

[GW Students Mobilize to Counter COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media \(/gw-students-mobilize-counter-covid-19-misinformation-social-media\)](#)

July 08, 2021

More than 100 student volunteers have joined the GW Health Communication Volunteer Corps.

[Three GW Research Initiatives Awarded PIT-UN Funding \(/three-gw-research-initiatives-awarded-pit-un-funding\)](#)

November 13, 2020

These interdisciplinary collaborations will provide opportunities for students to explore careers in public interest technology.

[GW Joins University Network to Advance Public Interest Technology \(/gw-joins-university-network-advance-public-interest-technology\)](#)

May 15, 2020

University will prepare a new generation of leaders to recognize and consider the societal implications of new technologies.



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## **Ethical Tech Initiative of DC**

**Principal Investigators: Professor Robert Brauneis and Professor Dawn Nunziato**  
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### **List of Intellectual Property and Assets Purchased or Created with the Grant**

1. Video of ETI Roundtable, “Access to Civil Justice and the Role of Technology,” created October 13, 2021, available at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/>, and on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/0Pj2RSBUcU0>.
2. Video of ETI Roundtable, “Algorithms, Consumer Protection, and Government Accountability,” created November 15, 2021, available at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/>, and on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/gAxlprvMTjs>.
3. Video of ETI Roundtable, “How Tech Can Improve Access to Justice,” created March 22, 2021, available at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/video/>, and on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/XwDwaggSiHU>.
4. Artificial Intelligence Litigation Database, available at <https://blogs.gwu.edu/law-eti/ai-litigation-database/>