SEMQ REVIEW

The Equality Machine: Harnessing Digital Technology for a Brighter, More Inclusive Future

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Reviewed by Tammy Johnson

In *The Equality Machine*, Orly Lobel explores the pervasive biases embedded in digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). She argues that intentional and equitable design is both necessary and possible for fostering fairness and opportunity. Lobel's book is essential reading, especially as we consider the implications of technologies that are increasingly integrated into every aspect of our personal and professional lives. Lobel organizes her book in an unexpected way, with sections titled "Mind," "Body," "Senses," "Heart," and "Soul." This human-centric structure underscores her main argument: technology must be harnessed to better serve humanity, not control it. We can no longer afford to be passive consumers of digital technology. As new technologies increasingly shape every facet of society, from hiring practices to healthcare to education, our responsibility lies in understanding and influencing how they are both designed and applied.

Lobel examines biases in the production of digital technologies across various fields and industries and argues that the design decisions behind digital tools can inadvertently embed developer biases, whether conscious or unconscious. While she doesn't specifically address strategic enrollment management (SEM) in her book, her case studies—from flawed hiring algorithms to biases in facial recognition—demonstrate how these biases can be introduced into educational technologies as well. The recent, rapid adoption of new technologies in higher education has already radically reshaped recruitment, admissions, and retention processes. These tools may offer increased efficiencies, but they also raise significant ethical concerns related to access and bias. Instead of simply adopting the tools provided by technology companies, SEM professionals must also advocate for design choices that prioritize fairness in their applications, as these choices have the potential to significantly influence outcomes for all groups.

To illustrate her argument, Lobel employs specific real-world examples that highlight the necessity and feasibility of equitable technology design. On page eighteen, she writes, "we cannot correct what we don't measure. We cannot improve what we don't study," highlighting the need for rigorous evaluation and accountability in technology development. This insight is especially relevant for SEM professionals, who must critically examine both the data collection methods used in student

recruitment and admissions as well as the structural biases that may influence them—whether from within their own institutions or from external vendors. Those working in SEM already recognize that biases can arise when relying on faulty data inputs or from user error. But to move beyond outdated practices and more fully engage all student groups, we must be aware of the underlying architecture of the tools themselves.

Another key area Lobel addresses is communication. The development of AI-powered tools invites institutions to consider not only the efficiency of communication but also its impact on accessibility, particularly for students and families whose primary language isn't English. Institutions can provide real-time, around-the-clock support, which not only streamlines enrollment processes but also aids in retention, as students today expect quick, customized responses. Lobel also emphasizes how AI can reduce bias in hiring practices. By screening resumes and conducting blind hiring, AI can help eliminate unconscious bias. SEM professionals can draw parallels when considering how AI might help in mitigating human bias in selective admissions processes. AI could offer a more equitable way to evaluate candidates for admission or scholarship awards by focusing strictly on objective criteria, thus removing personal biases from the equation.

While Lobel's arguments are compelling, some readers might find her optimism about fostering collaboration between tech developers and the professionals who use the technology somewhat idealistic. Influencing the design of equitable technology demands more concrete strategies than *The Equality Machine* provides. Furthermore, the sheer scale of the technological challenges Lobel discusses—such as the complexity of existing systems, the speed of technological advancement, and the widely varied capacities of institutions in different fields—poses significant hurdles that demand a playbook for SEM professionals who want to be part of the conversation surrounding the development of technologies in their field. What would effective collaboration look like in practice? How can stakeholders initiate meaningful dialogue when power dynamics often skew in favor of tech developers and vendors?

Ultimately, *The Equality Machine* underscores the dual nature of digital technologies, revealing their transformative potential alongside the ethical challenges they pose for higher education. For SEM professionals, the takeaway is clear: while technology experts may create these tools, it is up to higher education professionals to engage actively with these innovations, ensuring that they promote opportunities rather than perpetuate barriers.

About the Author

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Tammy Johnson, Ed.D., currently serves as Executive Director of Doctoral Programs and Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies in the College of Education and Professional Development at Marshall University. Prior to this role, she most recently served as associate vice president of enrollment and dean of admissions at Marshall, with broad oversight of student service functions, including undergraduate, graduate, and international admissions, as well as immigration, international student services, and student financial aid. Dr. Johnson has served as an American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) national caucus co-chair and, twice, as chair of the national AACRAO Admissions Policies and Practices Committee. She has presented multiple times, on a variety of subjects, at state, regional, and national conferences, including AACRAO, WVACRAO, NAFSA, NASPA, SRCEA, WVASPA, WVTESOL and AESA. Her areas of research interest include higher education administration and leadership, strategic enrollment management, and issues related to expanding access to post-secondary educational opportunities for all students. Dr. Johnson's previously published work appears in The Chronicle of Higher Education, the NASPA-sponsored book Increasing Adult Learner Persistence and Completion Rates: A Guide for Student Affairs Leaders and Practitioners, the AACRAO-sponsored book Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Student Body, College and University Journal, and the NACAC textbook: Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling (2024). She is a current member of the Strategic Enrollment Quarterly (SEMQ) Editorial Board and holds earned degrees from The University of Charleston (B.S.), Texas Woman's University (M.Ed.), and Marshall University (Ed.D.).