How Social Media Can Revolutionize Mental Health: Opportunities, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

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Social media platforms continue to deeply intertwine with our lives. In this talk I will present a body of work, spanning more than half a decade, demonstrating how social media can serve two purposes supporting our mental wellbeing. First, employing social media as a passive “sensor” of behaviors, emotion, socialization, and linguistic expression, I will highlight a series of projects that enable fine-grained and proactive assessment of risk to conditions as diverse as depression, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress and anxiety. Second, I will talk about how several social media sites are purposefully and inadvertently providing an interventional platform, ranging from meeting support needs of vulnerable individuals, to enhancing therapeutic outcomes. Cross-cutting across this research agenda, I will discuss the broader implications for the computing field, as well as mental health research and practice, and the ethical and privacy challenges we have encountered, what we have done about them, and what questions still remain. In conclusion, I will highlight three ongoing multi-institutional initiatives that define the next phase of this research program, and the opportunities and open issues that lie ahead – one around addressing the mental health challenges of college students, a second around building a psychologically healthy and thriving workplace, and a third around improving how we clinically treat, intervene, and care for mental illness.

Munmun De Choudhury is an assistant professor in the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Tech, where she directs the Social Dynamics and Wellbeing Lab. Dr. De Choudhury’s research interests lie at the intersection of machine learning, social computing, and health. She is best known for laying the foundation of a new line of research focusing on assessing, understanding, and improving personal and societal mental health from online social interactions. Dr. De Choudhury’s work has been the recipient of ten awards at premier conferences and has also been extensively covered by prominent popular press like the New York Times and the NPR. Earlier, Dr. De Choudhury was a faculty associate with the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, a postdoc at Microsoft Research, and obtained her PhD in Computer Science from Arizona State University.

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