Algorithms as normative tools

Panel C1- Lausanne
21.10.2021, 13h30 - 14h15
Panel suggested by André Cardozo Sarli
Reporters: Claudia Amsler, André Cardozo Sarli

Discussion Leader:

André Sarli is a PhD candidate in Sociology and Children's Rights at the Center for Children's Rights Studies since January 2019. He is working on the SNF project "The participatory capability of children in street situations in Brazil and China" led by Prof. Daniel Stoecklin. His doctoral research focuses on the interplay of vulnerable childhoods in Brazil, technology appropriation and rights of the child in the digital environment. André said he is in his early career in studying technological studies and he came mostly to hear what others will share.

Discussion Goal:

The main goal of the discussion was to exchange literature, perspectives and experiences about the supposed status of normativity in algorithms, both from a legal or social sense.

Summary:

The discussion was centered on the power of algorithms in shaping our lives, such as in judicial systems and allocation processes. However, one particular influence was discussed through Jessica Pidoux's work on dating apps, evidencing the bi-directional form of construction of those norms and application, through users and developers at the same time. It was commented how those algorithms of personalisation should be put under a wider context of the structure of internet business, where we are seen as consumers, and our data is also a product. The grain of salt comes from the push and nudges to maximize engagement and therefore monetize our presence in the application.

Main challenges:

The ambiguity towards algorithms is challenging: Algorithms can be helpful for different research interests, but they can also perpetuate prevailing power mechanisms. It is important to make these normative mechanisms visible. The issue of the definition of what an algorithm is is at a stake. Also the problem of the "algorithmic bubble" was discussed.

Why is this an issue in DH?

In the DH research is done with algorithms and new algorithms are also programmed, so it is central to be sensitive to their normative power, also to avoid possible bias in programming.

Proposed solutions:

The session focused on the difficulties and challenges of algorithms, and especially that we are immersed in it. A few tools were shared among the participants to raise awareness about the processes of data collection, for instance, to know about your digital double.

References

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Layers of Knowledge Production in Artificial Intelligence on Social Media." Big Data & Society 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 1–11.

Möllers, C. (2015). Die Möglichkeit der Normen: über eine Praxis jenseits von Moralität und Kausalität. Suhrkamp Verlag.

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Pidoux, J. (2019). Toi et moi, une distance calculée. Les pratiques de quantification algorithmiques sur Tinder (No. BOOK_CHAP, p. 370). Hermann Éditeurs.

Noble, S. U. (2018). Algorithms of oppression. New York University Press.

Vaidhyanathan, S. (2011). The Googlization of everything. University of California Press.

Suggestions of websites:

About Google's Algorithm: https://backlinko.com/google-ranking-factors

tool for ads targeting https://eyeballs.hestialabs.org/en/

Dating Privacy collective for understanding Dating app algorithms, this is the wiki page with a lot of info on dating apps, you can also join the collective: https://wiki.personaldata.io/wiki/Project:Dating_Privacy