**IP 3: Algorithms**

Discuss how the meanings of these 5 terms have changed, drawing from [Chapter 1](https://go.exlibris.link/TyzS13r4) of Neyland’s (2019) *The Everyday Life of an Algorithm* to help you explain the role of algorithms in reconfiguring their meanings.

1. Informed consent
2. Fair use
3. Discrimination and net neutrality
4. Personalization
5. Friend

Neyland’s article (2019) *The Everyday Life of an Algorithm* implores its readers to engage with the inner workings of the algorithm in order to make sense of it. This is prudent given how pervasive algorithms are foundational to the functioning of human life as they directly impact social, moral, ethical and physical actions continuously (Neyland, 2019, p. 11). Algorithms are no longer seen as neutral but rather powerful in its ability to control the flow of information. They have even interfered with elections and thus threaten the very notion of democracy (Noble, 2018, p. 52). As such, algorithms in its evolution have inevitably reconfigured the definitions of words.

Wikipedia defines **informed consent** to be the “process by means of which a research participant agrees to be the subject of research” (“Informed consent”, 2023). However, Neyland (2019) discusses the secrecy shrouding algorithms, how they operate and its lack of transparency (p. 3) such that informed consent is blurred. Users are not often aware of data being collected on them and while there are terms of service and privacy policies available in print, it would appear more perfunctorily for legal purposes. Do people really provide informed consent if they do not understand the terms of service, privacy policy and manner in which their data is shared? We are in essence being “researched” constantly, with or without our consent which hearkens back to the documentary “The Social Dilemma” that makes the case that we, the user, is the “product” where our data is being harvested and sold to advertisers for commercial use.

**Fair use** is known as the legal ability to use copyrighted work for the purposes of criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research (U.S. Copyright Office, 2023). With respect to algorithms, fair use refers to the legal nature of commercial algorithms that consume third party copyrighted data (Walker, 2018). Since algorithms operate on massive quantities of data sets, fair use becomes problematic because it is unclear whether algorithms may legally use copyrighted works without the permission from the original copyright holders (Walker, 2018). Algorithms do not have clearly defined boundaries on which fair use can be judged and so Crawford (2021) warns us against the dangers of the common view that data is “taken at will, used without restriction, and interpreted without context” (p. 118) because data collection is not a benevolent practice but instead has “obscured its operations of power, protecting those who profit most while avoiding responsibility for its consequences” (p. 121).

**Discrimination** is the act of using distinctions to disadvantage people commonly based on race, gender identity, sex, age, religion, disability, or sexual orientation (“Discrimination”, 2023) while **net neutrality** is the principle that “Internet service providers must treat all internet communications equally regardless of website, platform, application etc. and without price discrimination” (“Net neutrality”, 2023). However, it would seem naïve to assume algorithms are neutral and do not practice discrimination. Neyland (2019) writes “algorithms are powerful and agential, easily able to enact and execute orders” (p. 15) as they are only as neutral as their programmers. Unfortunately, neutral content is not profitable thus allowing egregious and racist content to proliferate tech platforms (Noble, 2018, p. 58). In the end, women and people of colour continue to be marginalized, objectified and commercialized (Noble, 2018, p. 63) due to **algorithmic bias**. Looking at the PageRank algorithm, it can be found to discriminate truth due to the number of page links from other pages which has given rise to the popularity of fake news.

**Personalization** or **customization** consists of “tailoring a service or a product to accommodate specific individuals, sometimes tied to groups or segments of individuals” (“Personalization”, 2023). Through the use of algorithms such as Recommender Systems, it has now evolved to be the tailoring of a service based on our preferences and behaviors particularly for commercialization purposes. Noble explains personalization as “giving people the results they want on the basis of what Google knows about its users, but it is also generating results for viewers to see what Google Search thinks might be good for advertisers by means of compromises to the basic algorithm” (Noble, 2018, p. 54). Personally, this has been felt in my own social media use on Facebook, which is notorious for its over hundred-billion dollar ad generating revenue through the power of targeted ads delivered through their algorithms. One caveat of personalization in a user’s experience is recommender systems will only curate content that discourages the diversity of views and instead reinforces the polarization of differing opinions.

Wikipedia defines a **friend** as a partner in friendship, which is an interpersonal relationship between humans (“Friend”, 2023). However, Neyland (2019) posits that the algorithm is not just a participant in the everyday, but also composes the everyday and becomes the everyday (p. 13). Friend, as it relates to algorithms, includes artificial intelligence that mimics social interactions. Virtual voice assistants like Siri and Alexa can hold engaging, personalized conversations that include the use of jokes, advice and empathy when prompted. As AI improves to be almost indistinguishable from humans, we must be aware of the concerns of engaging with such technology. Being trained on data that personalizes interactions, the algorithm can also be used to manipulate humans. Proper privacy protocols are required to protect people’s privacy. “Algorithms are said to provide a truth for modern living, a means to shape our lives, play a central role in financial growth and forms of exchange and participate in forms of governmentality through which we become algorithmic selves” (Neyland, 2019, p. 6). However, genuine human connection cannot be replaced by an algorithm.

While algorithms have enhanced our lives in optimization, task performance, data analysis and personalization, there is a growing concern over “academic accountability and deepening our understanding of the power of algorithms to participate in the production of effects” (Neyland, 2019, p. 8). Noble (2018) insists that we need public policy that advocates protections from the effects of unregulated and unethical artificial intelligence (p. 181). Only time will tell whether Pandora’s Box can truly be contained.

(1007 words).

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