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Introduction to the special issue: algorithms for her? Feminist claims to technical language

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& Rebecca Saunders**

Academia is beholden to linguistic fashions. Knowing the “right” buzzwords moves things, interpellating a response from gatekeepers. For the last few years, it seems algorithms are in linguistic fashion. Critics across disciplines are making sense of the scale in which these complex technical processes structure our lives: that governments use them for predatory forms of policing (V. Eubanks 2018); insurance brokers to distribute access to lifesaving medical treatments (C. O’Neil 2016); search engines and social media platforms to assign visibility to content (Noble 2018). Discussing algorithms is productive (and profitable), affording success in academic publishing, procuring funding and grabbing the attention of policymakers. Just as “certain words stick to certain bodies” (S. Ahmed 2012, 62), the linguistic zeitgeist favours some speakers over others. Thus, in this special issue we ask: who gets to speak about algorithms? Who is listened to and who is ignored? Does the discussion of algorithms *do things* for everyone equally? This Special Issue has arisen from a one-day symposium we organised (in person!) in London in January 2020, called “Algorithms for Her?” The enormous and enthusiastic international response to our CFP underscored the multiple ways in which algorithms are clearly a feminist issue.

We find that the contributions of those across intersections of women, scholars of colour, queer folk and the differently abled are markedly under-represented within the algorithmic canon. Although a body of scholarship that could loosely be called “critical algorithmic studies” is interested in revealing

inequalities which are sustained and produced by algorithms, it is largely dominated by “principles-based approaches” such as “fairness, accountability and transparency” (M. Latzer and N. Just 2020, 9). We consider these worthy areas of study, but often find them lacking in their attention and commitment to social justice. The feminist approach we are advocating here would address this deficit. It would do so by paying attention to the specific experiential intersections of power, embodiment and visibility that are embedded in and facilitated by algorithmic mechanisms. Such an approach reveals the complexities and assumptions that an “equalities” approach brings to bear on the study and regulation of algorithmic systems of knowledge production.

We can broadly define algorithms as “coded instructions that a computer needs to follow, to perform a given task” (T. Bucher 2018, 2). Algorithms are often designed and deployed by those with the authority to assign resources and visibility to others, often in obscure ways and with little (if any) accountability. We can think of algorithmic processes as powerful in their coded functions, but also in terms of their entanglements within political economic contexts, designs and scenarios of use. Algorithms are world-shaping, and they often shape the world in uneven and unequal ways. A feminist approach to analysing automated technologies of classification and prediction helps to illuminate how these registers of inequality play out onscreen and off. Ultimately, a feminist methodology helps highlight what is at stake for today’s digital subjects.

In this Special Issue we present a selection of papers from the conference, foregrounding three themes—institutional contexts; algorithmic auditing and play; and algorithmic contributions to the gendered self. Firstly, algorithmic systems, as they are increasingly used in *institutional contexts*, often reify enduring social and cultural inequalities. In her contribution to this Special Issue, Bev Skeggs shows us that data brokers use algorithmic processes to process hundreds of thousands of data points, producing very different “hers” based on well-worn markers of social class, trapping those assessed as working

class in spirals of high interest rates and debt. Then, Sophie Toupin and Stephane Couture examine how feminist chatbots are deployed to address aspects of institutional inequality and misogyny. They ask what makes a chatbot “feminist,” and how this orientation is served (or challenged) by existing algorithmic typologies and models.

Secondly, we consider *algorithmic auditing and algorithmic play*, in which we can understand how content creators, practitioners and activists audit technical processes to foreground how they work (or more specifically, are not working). Carolina Are demonstrates how pole dancers coordinated in 2019 to elicit an apology from Instagram for censoring “female nudity,” and drawing attention to broader waves of gendered censorship on the platform. During this campaign, activists engaged in algorithmic play, for example by repeatedly tagging the chiefs of Facebook and Instagram in their pictures of their naked bottoms. Through this particular focus on feminist activism, we can rearrange the people considered to be algorithmic experts. That women “hack” systems in creative ways counters gendered assessments of technical competence, interest and participation—particularly as play is employed to highlight instances of gendered and raced injustice (B. E. Duffy and B. Schwartz 2018). Furthermore, we should also consider who strategically seeks to be rendered invisible in algorithmically-enacted attention economies. Melissa Bliss’s contribution builds on feminist works exploring the relationship between age, gender and visibility to show how older woman are siloed by YouTube’s algorithm.

Lastly, this Special Issue addresses how technical processes contribute to the digital construction of the self, and more specifically the *construction of gender*. Ysabel Gerrard considers gender bias within the content moderation processes of social media platforms. She points out how hidden decision making behind social media platforms shapes the outcomes of flagging and complaint, and render some hate speech “permissible.” Gerrard draws attention to how, taken together, both automated and human-enacted classification

processes contribute to our digital identities and experiences on proprietary social media platforms—and provides recommendations for platforms, users and policy makers.

Ahmed (2012, 61) argues that we become tired and sick with words because they are ultimately “not doing it;” attention fades when social change does not take place and we move on. We keep going on the conceptual treadmill, employing new labels to try and articulate about the ways society and culture are made and remade unequally and unjustly. Even in offering a critique of fashionable words, one must wield them for a convincing performance of academic relevance and value. However, we argue that it is worth examining how algorithms engender material consequences. In 2020, our lives are increasingly lived as contingent on the workings of proprietary, automated technologies that decide “for us” and “about us.” To that end, this collection aims to showcase a variety of feminist work that challenges those claims, classifications and techniques of understanding. We wish to advance an inclusive critique of algorithmic culture that locates how algorithms work, the injuries they encode and the different bodies they work upon.

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