Can an algorithm be agonistic? Ten scenes about living in calculated publics

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A response to:


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1. Tarleton Gillespie writes in ‘The Relevance of Algorithms’: ‘What we need is an interrogation of algorithms as a key feature of our information ecosystem (Anderson 2011), and of the cultural forms emerging in their shadows (Striphas 2010), with a close attention to where and in what ways the introduction of algorithms into human knowledge practices may have political ramifications’ (p.1). What is the vision of ‘the political’ that is invoked here? Gillespie outlines six dimensions of what he calls public relevance algorithms that he describes as having political valence: patterns of inclusion, cycles of anticipation, the evaluation of relevance, the promise of algorithmic objectivity, the entanglement with practice and the production of calculated publics. It is this final category, the calculated public, where I would like to explore the logics of algorithmically-produced publics, and how political theory may help us map those logics against different visions of ‘the political.’

2. A woman is sitting in a chair, a laptop on her knees, and she is buying some books written by authors of a conference she’s about to attend, Governing Algorithms. When she buys Tarleton Gillespie’s book Wired Shut, she is informed that ‘Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought’ James Boyle’s The Public Domain, William Patry’s How to Fix
Copyright by and Biella Coleman’s Coding Freedom. She begins imagining who this group of imagined shoppers might be. Are they interested in the same topics as her? Should she buy a book about reforming copyright law or an ethnographic account the Debian community? These are fairly different topics, so who are these other customers and what unites them in these particular tastes? We can imagine some of these answers, but we cannot know for sure how Amazon has determined them. In fact, even senior Amazon developers may not be able to tell us exactly how this imagined public of customers has been created, and how it changed over time as millions of books are bought and profiles updated. Algorithms do not always behave in predictable ways, and extensive randomized testing – called A/B testing – is used with search algorithms just to observe how they actually function with large datasets. Gillespie argues that algorithms ‘not only structure our interactions with others as members of networked publics, they also traffic in calculated publics that they themselves produce.’ Thus Amazon is both ‘invoking and claiming to know a public with which we are invited to feel an affinity’, an imagined community that ‘may overlap with, be an inexact approximation of, or have nothing whatsoever to do with the publics that the user sought out.’ The woman with the laptop types in a different author: Evgeny Morozov. She is told that Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought, amongst other things, Eric Schmidt’s The New Digital Age and Kevin Kelly’s What Technology Wants. Are these books similar? Have people, like her, bought Morozov and Gillespie’s books together? Not that we know. Instead, we are shown a calculated public, but we do not know their membership, their concerns, whether they loved or hated these books. There is simply a consensus: these books, and people, are Frequently Represented Together.

3. Is talking about the political ramifications of algorithms enough, or can we take a further step? McKenzie Wark argues that technology and the political are not separate things: ‘one is simply looking at the same systems through different lenses when one speaks of the political or the technical’ (2013). Likewise, Alex Galloway notes that we should not focus so much on devices, or platforms or apparatuses as such and more on the systems of power that they mobilize (2012, p.18). So let us speak for a moment about algorithms as political theories and vice versa. Some thinkers see certain algorithms, like Edgerank, as essentially autocratic – making decisions without our knowledge, invisible to us, presenting a
singular worldview. Barbara Cassin has described how other algorithms, like PageRank, appear to have a more deliberative democratic ethos, ‘using graph theory to valorize pure heterogeneity, showing how quality is an emergent property of quantity’ as part of an imagined consensus (Galloway 2013, p. 137). But what about alternative political frameworks? What if we were to consider what a model of agonistic pluralism would look like? Which is to say, start with a premise of ongoing struggle (agonism) between different groups and structures (pluralism) – recognizing that complex, shifting negotiations are occurring between people, algorithms and institutions, always acting in relation to each other.

4. Chantal Mouffe is being interviewed for a political magazine. She is asked, ‘how do you define democracy, if not as a consensus?’ In response, she describes the difference between the model of traditional liberal democracy and her notion of agonistic pluralism: ‘I use the concept of agonistic pluralism to present a new way to think about democracy which is different from the traditional liberal conception of democracy as a negotiation among interests and is also different to the model which is currently being developed by people like Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls. While they have many differences, Rawls and Habermas have in common the idea that the aim of the democratic society is the creation of a consensus, and that consensus is possible if people are only able to leave aside their particular interests and think as rational beings. However, while we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted’ (1998).

5. In New York City, a group chat is occurring at Reddit. The discussion is about their ‘hot sorting’ algorithm, and how posts in some areas of the site become front page stories with relatively few upvotes. At the same time, in southern Nebraska, a group of 15-year-old girls meet at a friend’s house to discuss how they could influence Reddit’s system. They discuss how to band people together to upvote a story of homophobic harassment of a boy at their school, in order to gain national media attention and shame the perpetrators.
6. Can an algorithm be agonistic? Algorithms may be rule-based mechanisms that fulfill requests, but they are also governing agents that are choosing between competing, and sometimes conflicting, data objects. If algorithms present us with a ‘new knowledge logic’ as Gillespie persuasively suggests, then it is important to consider the contours of that logic, and by which histories and philosophies it is most strongly shaped. Certainly, it would be difficult to describe many public relevance algorithms as agonistic: so much of the messy business of choosing the order of search results, which books are sold together, or which news stories are most relevant is kept far from view, inside the algorithmic ‘black box’. What we see is a single result, or a neatly curated selection that matches our preferences and previous data behaviours. Much of the algorithmic work of determining the winners of information contests is invisible to us. As Gillespie observes, the criteria by which algorithms determine evaluation are obscured from us while they are enacting political choices about appropriate and legitimate knowledge. Yet these deliberations are crucial; this is the stuff of governance, which is to say the lower case ‘g’ governance that Lazzarato describes as ‘the ensemble of techniques and procedures put into place to direct the conduct of men and to take account of the probabilities of their action and their relations’ (Lazzarato 2009, p.114).

7. If the politics of many public relevance algorithms is commonly located on a spectrum between autocracy and deliberative democracy, we can discuss the limitations of those models. In Mouffe’s words, ‘when we accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of exclusion, we can begin to envisage the nature of a democratic public sphere in a different way’ (1999, p.755) And so we reach her strongest argument for why agonism is important:

This is why a pluralist democracy needs to make room for dissent and for the institutions through which it can be manifested. Its survival depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, as well as on the possibility of choosing between real alternatives (1999, p.756). (emphasis added)
And this is why it matters whether algorithms can be agonistic, given their roles in deliberation and governance. When the logic of algorithms is understood as autocratic, this poses serious problems when we wish to intervene in their process of governance. If algorithms adopt deliberative democratic paradigms, it assumes an internet of equal agents, rational debate, and emerging consensus positions. This is not the internet that many of us would recognise. What would a logic of agonistic pluralism look like? Perhaps it would emphasise that algorithmic decision-making is always a contest, one that is choosing from often counterposed perspectives, within a field where irrationality and emotion are expected. As an ethos, it would assume perpetual conflict, recognize contestation and, in William Connolly’s words, promote ‘multiple constituencies honouring different moral sources’ (1999, p 51). But it would at least offer the ability to choose between ‘real alternatives’. This offers a different path than the disappointingly limited calls for algorithmic ‘transparency’, which are doomed to fail, as Gillespie observes, given that companies like Facebook and Twitter won’t reveal a proprietary algorithm’s workings for fear of losing their competitive edge, and of users ‘gaming the system.’ Instead, to recognise the value of different perspectives and opposing interests involves both an acceptance of what Howarth calls ‘the common rules of the game’2, and an expectation that conflict and ‘gaming’ of systems is an ‘infinite process’ (2008, p. 187) and that algorithms are participants in wider institutional and capitalist logics.

8. Gillespie in ‘The Relevance of Algorithms’: ‘Foregoing the possibility of a perfectly transparent algorithm, there is a range of choices open to a developer as to how straightforward to be. This can be as simple as being more forthright in the characterization of the tool, or by providing an explanation for why certain ads were served up with a page, or it could be providing more careful site documentation.’ Could the hidden conflicts between forms of knowledge could be admitted to, if not piercing the filter bubble, at least forthrightly acknowledging that other bubbles exist? This brings us closer to an agonistic ideal, where public relevance algorithms could acknowledge difference and dissent rather than a silently calculated public of assumed consensus and unchallenged values.
9. Where else are we to find agonism in the field of algorithms? Perhaps the problem here is the fetishisation of ‘algorithms’ without widening the perspective to include the many ways in which algorithms are rarely stable, and always in relation with people: that is, both in flux and embedded in hybrid spaces. For example, we can look to the companies and offices where algorithms are created (for example, Nick Seaver’s research of studying the developers who make music recommendation algorithms). These workplaces are themselves spaces of conflict and contestation. Or we can look to the spaces where algorithms and people are interacting in quite public ways: for example, Reddit makes part of its algorithmic ranking process public. Users like having more awareness of the rules of the system, and some enjoy the possibility of gaming it. It offers a particular kind of legitimacy, while completely closed, more autocratic systems such as Facebook create more suspicion. Or we can even look to the ways people reverse engineer algorithms, acting in direct contestation, where the troll and the hacker become key players in an agonistic system. By using a wider optic, we can see that algorithms are always already working in contested human spaces.

10. The final word, then, goes to Gillespie: ‘In attempting to say something of substance about the way algorithms are shifting our public discourse, we must firmly resist putting the technology in the explanatory driver’s seat. While recent sociological study of the Internet has labored to undo the simplistic technological determinism that plagued earlier work, that determinism remains an alluring analytical stance. A sociological analysis must not conceive of algorithms as abstract, technical achievements, but must unpack the warm human and institutional choices lie behind these cold mechanisms.” I take this as a useful reminder to look beyond algorithms as a fetishized object to consider the developers in cubicle farms, the teenage hackers, the Amazon book buyers, and the multitude of flesh and blood scenes where humans and algorithms engage.

References


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1 I wish to thank Mark Deuze, Kate Miltner and Megan Finn for inspiring conversations and suggestions as I was writing this response.

2 Another promising approach for thinking about algorithms and agonism can be found in the work of James Tully. As Mark Wenman explains: ‘Tully’s conception of agonistic dialogue is especially influenced by the Wittgensteinian conception of ‘language games’ [and] Wittgenstein’s insight that the socio-linguistic games that are our ‘forms of life’ are never bound by hard and fast rules. This is because language users inevitably find themselves in the position where they are able to alter the rules of the game as they go along (Tully, 1995, 108). As Tully puts it ‘no matter how elaborate such a rule might be, it is always possible to interpret and apply it in various ways’ (Tully, 1995, 106). For Tully, there is a clear link between the agonal and dialogic games of mutual cultural recognition—which he thinks are constitutive of social relations—and the notion of human freedom (Tully, 1999, 162–169). For Tully, ‘politics is the type of game in which the framework—the rules of the game—can come up for deliberation and amendment in the course of the game.’ (Wenman 2003, p. 177)