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Algorithms of Opporession: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism

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Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism

Reviewed by Jazmin "JD" Dantzler, M.S.

In *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, Dr. Safiya Umoja Noble explores her ten years of research surrounding algorithmic bias to demonstrate how search engines reinforce racism and sexism. Noble is a tenured Professor at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in the Department of Information Studies where she also co-founded and co-directs the UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry (C2i2). In 2010, Noble conducted a Google search for "Black girls" and was appalled by the disparaging search results. Embedded in anti-Blackness, the search yielded hypersexualized and stereotypical results, framing Black women as commodities for sexual gratification and inhumane treatment. Although algorithmic biases are present throughout technological ecosystems, Google is influential as the leading search engine and many users consider it a neutral technology. In her book, Noble explains the belief of neutral technology is problematic because ranking systems used by Google are not created based on trustworthiness or credibility, but rather corporations and people who are able to pay for priority rankings. *Algorithms of Oppression* highlights the failures of algorithms "specific to

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people of color and women" and underscores "the structural ways that racism and sexism are fundamental to what [she has] coined *algorithmic oppression*" (p. 4).

Algorithms of Oppression is organized into six chapters: "A Society, Searching," "Searching for Black Girls," "Searching for People and Communities," "Searching for Protections from Search Engines," "The Future of Knowledge in the Public," "The Future of Information Culture." Noble shares the purpose of the book is to draw attention to the "power of algorithm in the age of neoliberalism and the ways those digital decisions reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling," which she calls *technological redlining*" (p. 1). In Chapter 1, the author shares her experience with Google which motivated her research. The disparaging nature of these search engine results demonstrated the commodification, hyper sexualization, and degradation of Black women. As Noble described, "their bodies are defined by a technological system that does not take into account the broader social, political, and historical significance of racist and sexist representations" (p. 32).

In Chapter 2, Noble explores how Google reinforces racism and sexism without taking responsibility nor acknowledging their role in perpetuating stereotypes for women of color. To substantiate this argument, Chapter 3 examines Google search engine results which frame minorities as dangerous and subhuman resulting in acts of violence and hatred toward them. For example, in the case of domestic terrorist Dylann Roof, who massacred nine African American AME Church members as they worshipped in their church home, his initial search of "black on White crime" on Google informed a skewed view of race relations and prompted his violent actions. In Chapter 4, Noble calls for the protection from search engines in an effort to preserve user's digital footprints. Noble shifts her attention in Chapter 5, calling for library and information professionals to be trained and provided continued development opportunities on the politics and ethics of cataloging and classification. In Chapter 6, she explores the future of information culture and urges for public policies that will hold technological ecosystems accountable and provide equitable regulations. Noble concludes with a call to "recognize the importance of how algorithms are shifting social relations" (p. 13) and analyzes the presidential victory of Donald Trump, White supremacy, and the increased accessibility of fake news.

Overall, this book is organized, well-written, and easy to follow specifically for those outside of the field of Technology and Information Studies. It is a call to action for library and information professionals and a guide for everyday users of technology to become more knowledgeable of the impact of the technological ecosystems we rely on. The book is written in a manner that is easy to comprehend and relatable for a diverse and wide range of readers. Regardless of their engagement level, readers who are users of technological ecosystems mentioned in this book have the opportunity to see the Internet as "the most unregulated social experiment of our times" (p. 6). Noble shares one of her primary goals is to "uncover new ways of thinking about search results and the power that such results have on our way of knowing and relating" (p. 71). She expertly draws attention to the imbalances of power maintained through the engagement and reliance of search engines.

The topics in this book are applicable to today's Christian higher education professionals because Christian practitioners must be informed of systems that cultivate oppression and power imbalance. As Christian practitioners are called to educate and serve students in a manner that glorifies Christ, this book is a reminder of a foundational aspect of higher education—we must call attention to systems of oppression as we teach and care for the whole student. Search engines are influential in how we receive information and perceive the world around us. Christian practitioners must be aware of using phrases such as "just Google it" when encouraging students and peers to find information, because trustworthiness and credibility are not always present in the aforementioned technological ecosystem. *Algorithms of Oppression* is needed and benefits the field of higher education because it promotes becoming aware of the impact of misinformation and maintains social justice in the systems that influence college students.

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