

Social Media Algorithms and Social Distrust

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Extended Abstract

In recent years, much has been made of the problem of “algorithmic injustice” and the related problem of “algorithmic oppression” (see Buolamwini 2017; Eubanks 2018; Noble 2018). These concepts seek to illuminate and explain the role of algorithms in exacerbating certain types of injustice (e.g., economic injustice, housing injustice, health injustice, and injustice within the criminal justice system). Within this growing conversation about “algorithmic injustice,” the focus has generally been at the “macro” level: algorithms reproducing discriminatory hiring practices, algorithms generating discriminatory decisions for mortgages or credit lending, algorithms generating biased predictions about the likelihood of recidivism in criminal justice contexts, and the like. While this “macro” level perspective, focused primarily on the use of algorithms in various types of institutional-level decision-making procedures, is undoubtedly important, there remains more to uncover about the role of algorithms in perpetuating social injustice. Specifically, more analysis of the influence of algorithms on our daily, interpersonal interactions (e.g., on social media and in real-life (offline) conversations with others, influenced as they are by social media) is needed.

In this paper, I explore some of this undertheorized domain, arguing that a robust accounting of the injustice and oppression that algorithms cause must also include analysis of the seemingly subtle ways in which algorithms influence our social worlds and daily interpersonal interactions with others. Focusing on the role of algorithms on social media specifically, I argue that two algorithmic processes – algorithmic targeting and algorithmic sorting – contribute to the further distortion of our social and epistemic worlds, worsening problems of epistemic injustice and oppression (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013) and related problems of social distrust (Stewart, Cichocki, McLeod, forthcoming).

The paper will elaborate upon these algorithmic processes, first named by my colleagues and I ((Stewart, Cichocki, McLeod, forthcoming), and illuminate their connection to the pressing problems of social distrust and division. The first, algorithmic sorting, as we have defined it, describes the increasing separation of people on social media into different epistemic worlds, which have little overlap in informational content. The result is that people come to know—or think they know—different “facts” and may even rely on different standards of evidence. The worldviews of others become increasingly distant, unfamiliar, or unrecognizable. The second, algorithmic targeting, describes the process that occurs when information or content is placed in front of the user, based on the algorithm’s prediction about their likelihood to view or engage with that content. Algorithms effectively direct users’ attention to specific content that is potentially of interest to them based on their previous engagement, like patterns, or time spent on particular pages. This process is like algorithmic sorting in that it shapes what epistemic worlds we inhabit. The consequence is more and more distance between our epistemic and social worlds.

Growing distance between groups (and related gaps in awareness and understanding of others' experiences) is at the core of pernicious social and epistemic ignorance (see for example Mills 2007; Dotson 2011). Over time, a lack of exposure to the lives, perspectives, and experiences of others deepens our extant ignorances and widens the gaps in our understanding (see Dotson 2011). Moreover, when one sees their own experiences and worldviews disproportionately reflected in the content presented to them, it makes it harder to recognize and appreciate the limits of one's own experience and knowledge. These epistemic gaps, I argue, exacerbate problems of distrust between social groups, and make knowledge gaps more difficult to overcome. This paper draws on concrete examples to illuminate the significance of this problem, and the role of social media algorithms in worsening it.

If we are to repair our fractured social and epistemic communities, we must have a better sense of the role our engagement with algorithms on social media play in our on- and offline social lives. I argue that this "micro" level focus must become a more central part of the growing conversation about algorithmic injustice and oppression.

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