

Data&Society

Who Controls the Public Sphere in an Era of Algorithms

Executive Summary for Workshop

DATA & SOCIETY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

On February 26, 2016, Data & Society hosted a one-day workshop that brought together a group of stakeholders whose work address themes of power, control, and values in the shaping of the public sphere as algorithms play an increasingly significant role in political and public life. Workshop participants included scholars from diverse academic fields, as well as technologists and civil society representatives who contributed perspectives on policy and engineering to the discussion. An underlying objective throughout the day's discussion was to move beyond academic debates towards engaging in translation work across fields and sectors.

While algorithms are involved in an ever-growing number of fields, this workshop was intentionally focused on areas where algorithms are impacting the structure and formation political and public life, and the spread of news and information. Participants raised a number of concerns about the increased role that algorithmic media companies such as Google and Facebook are playing in the production and dissemination of news and information, including the function algorithms are playing to edit and shape content flows and act as gatekeepers, the role engineers and other corporate actors have in embedding values within systems that may be different than those in the media/journalism industry in the past, the effect of personalization on common or public discourse, the monopolization/centralization of these services, and the lack of processes to hold companies and other powerful entities accountable.

Participants focused on potential solutions and interventions, and were separated into groups in which they discussed accountability frameworks and processes that have been proposed thus far, such as algorithmic transparency and computational literacy, and were encouraged to think of other potential solutions, looking outside of the U.S. framework and current technological paradigm to understand how media systems have been held similarly accountable. Participants discussed a number of options and opportunities in the areas of direct rulemaking and self-regulation, professional ethics and associations, and what role individuals should be playing in holding companies accountable.

The day's discussions opened up the possibility that oversight in this area is both desirable and possible, but that there are challenges and barriers that must be addressed in the aim of expanding research on accountability within data-driven and algorithmic systems. There was an increased awareness on the part of the participants that algorithms reflect not only the values and views of the engineers who are working on them, but those across the organizational structure of the platform (in particular platform owners and decision-makers), relationships between platform owners and other entities such as national governments, and interactions with users who are situated within broader political and cultural contexts. For this reason any accountability framework within algorithmic media may need to consider not only just the technical mechanisms, but the networks of relationships that both govern the design of and are affected and are affected by algorithms and data.

