AI MONITORS PRIMER

Artificial intelligence systems and the algorithms that drive them are permeating every aspect of modern day life. Large masses of data are analyzed by computers to determine whether someone gets a loan, what blocks are policed, or how much the government pays for healthcare. Decisions big and small are being made by computers and community journalists are on the frontlines to learn how these decisions are impacting real people.

Because community journalists are deeply embedded with the people they cover they're able to see the effects of poorly designed or discriminatory systems before anyone else. The questions below can help journalists be aware of just how pervasive these algorithms are and prepare them to ask the right questions as AI systems have a progressively bigger influence on the lives of their community.

WHAT IS AN ALGORITHM?

An algorithm is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as "a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer." An algorithm can be something as simple as a recipe or as complicated as the program that decides what shows up your Facebook news feed.

WHERE ARE ALGORITHMS?

Everywhere! Algorithms are used to evaluate job interviews, calculate credit scores, decide who gets bail, find dating matches, detect fraud, and determine what content you see on social media. There are very few things people do in life that aren't influenced by an algorithm in some way.

WHAT ARE KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN EVALUATING ALGORITHMS?

Think of the questions in four broad buckets:

1. Data Inputs

- What data is being used?
- What data is being omitted?

2. Code

- What assumptions are being made by the algorithm?
- What biases could the creator of the algorithm have?
- How could this algorithm be manipulated?

3. Measuring Outcomes

- What is the algorithm trying to measure?
- What is the algorithm actually measuring?
- What are potential confounding variables?

4. Validity of Outcomes

- How are the results of the outcome used?
- What is the impact of the algorithm?
- How well do the results of the algorithm matchup with real life examples?

You might not always be able to answer every one of these questions, but they can help guide your reporting.

HOW DOES THE GOVERNMENT USE ALGORITHMS?

Government officials at all levels use algorithms to enhance their decision making process. They're used in public safety, pre-trial risk assessment, evaluating teachers, determining levels of healthcare, combating fraud, and much more.

HOW CAN YOU REPORT ON GOVERNMENT ALGORITHMS?

Public records laws, including the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) at the federal level, allow any member of society to request documents about how algorithms are constructed and their outcomes. These types of requests can help you find out more about the outcomes of algorithms and how they operate. Other ways to find important information about government algorithms include lawsuits, open data, reports from inspectors general, contracts, and traditional sourcing. Each can give you insight into what might be happening.

HOW DO PRIVATE COMPANIES USE ALGORITHMS?

Companies have developed algorithms for all parts of life, including recommending new friends, building self-driving cars, facial recognition and surveillance, looking at interviews, selling ads, and determining what shows up on the first page of search results. Algorithms are big business. Facebook spent nearly $17 million to lobby the federal government in 2019.

WHAT IS THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK?

The laws around algorithms are being developed right now. New York City convened an Automated Decision Systems task force in 2019. They published a report about the use of algorithms in November. Other regulations, such as Europe's General Data Protection Regulation restrict how data can be kept and used. The courts are also getting involved. In February of 2020, a Dutch court ruled that an algorithmic welfare surveillance system violated human rights.

HOW CAN YOU REPORT ON ALGORITHMS AND YOUR COMMUNITY?

Because algorithms are becoming such a permanent fixture in daily life they touch every community in different ways. Ask yourself: Who do algorithms benefit? Who do they hurt? Are they continuing to entrench biases that stem from existing inequalities? How are they different from what people were doing before? Answering these questions can help unlock stories about the machines making decisions that affect people's everyday lives.

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