Opinion

Digital life between machinic partnerships and algorithmic institutionalism

Abstract

Technological innovation propels us into scenarios we often find disorienting in their overall social effects. This article invites us to be aware of our current condition of life in order to face our anthropological shift towards a cultural and social world dominated by the individual pursuit of machinic partnerships and the constraints and norms established by the new algorithmic institutionalism.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms, Spotify's algorithm, more time on screen.

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Introduction

Being a citizen of the 21st century involves having an increasing intimacy of use – and even bodily hybridization – with technologies of all kinds (bio, info, nano and neuro), as well as with algorithmic organizations/entities that have become, as matter of fact, cultural and social global institutions. We exist and operate in the world as composite and interacting assemblages of materials deriving from what we call nature, culture or technology, and in doing so we move within certain normative and value frames. Processes of hybridization have distinguished human beings since time immemorial, but the latest technological embodiment have even prompted us to call ourselves *cyborg* in an attempt to make sense of these profound existential turning points and their influence in individual and collective lives.[1]

Discussion

However, our ideal assimilation to cyborgs becomes an observation that may be snap at the moment, but not helpful in making people maintain critical attention to processes concerning the changes we quickly engulf, drawing us into socio-cultural ecologies we often find disorienting in their overall effects. Incidentally, in the technological side, not everything is developing with equal speed: it is easy to see how the "info" components, with the new machinic systems of an informational nature -increasingly driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms, scattered in every fold of information, work or entertainment products – are literally devouring us by raising their claims of social participation in terms of predictive automatisms and personalized responses. Such systems intermediate us in all sorts of activities, as certified by the amount of interactions and activities carried out daily via our smartphone, finally becoming the nerve center of our lives – as has been rightly noted, never in human history have we been so dependent on a single technology.[2] Of course, as we said, we are predisposed to this. Just to stay in the last few centuries, our inter-penetration with machines is a child of living in a highly industrialized and technologized world, in which we are accustomed to deploying ourselves using resources organized extensively by complex socio-technical systems, and we baste new relationships according to the forms and conditionings achieved by the new techno-human frontiers.[3] In short, to put it even more clearly, our condition is to live in constant pursuit of "*machinic partnerships*". More and more people around the world live connected to networks of software applications through which they communicate, work, inform and entertain themselves by spending a large portion of their daily time.[4]

We can try to image how they spend their own time following the philosopher Alberto Romele that, in an essay devoted to the algorithmic imaginary fueled by new AI software, summarizes a typical day of his own – we quote it entirety because it probably traces those of billions of other people. "When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is turn on my phone. To check the news, I use Google News, which brings up news that is interesting '*to me*'. I find, for example, the latest broadcast by the French radio station France Culture. Then I read something about Steph Curry, my favorite player in the National Basketball Association. Then there is news about the war in Ukraine or the street food in Paris, Porto, Verona, and Naples. Not only are all these things of great interest to me, but Google News also effectively selects the sources that most reflect my ethical, social, and political views.[5]

Sometimes I am fed news from the conservative French newspaper '*Le Figaro*', but this is a minor mistake because on a sleepless night, I was looking for information about the right-wing candidates in the last French presidential elections. I usually spend the morning writing. The first thing I do is put on my headphones and open Spotify on my computer. Spotify offers me numerous playlists: Discover Weekly, Release Radar, On Repeat, Your Summer Rewind, and so on. I love these playlists because they allow me to listen to new things that I already know '*will not bother me*' during my writing routine, because they sound so much like what I usually know, listen to, and enjoy that they go almost unnoticed. These songs will merely improve my morning mood and concentration on an almost unconscious level without creating an obstacle or friction. In a week or two, Spotify's algorithm will replace them with other songs, and I will not even notice. In the afternoons it is usually tiring for me to do real work. Mostly, I turn to answering emails from students and colleagues, solving administrative problems, and (but only if I really have time left over) reading something. I tend to be easily distracted, and so I often find myself browsing social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

I feel '*comfortable*' scrolling through these social media feeds, which I have helped build with likes, retweets, follows, and so on. I also find on those sites a fair balance between things that concern friends and acquaintances, others that concern strangers, and still others that concern products that, for one reason or another, might interest me. And it is not uncommon for me to click on the advertisements for these products, especially clothes, books, and concerts and other events, and end up buying them. At the end of the purchase, the same sites suggest other products that might appeal to me, based on the interests shown

by people who bought the same product(s) I just bought. Things do not end in the evening either; after putting my children to bed, my wife and I sit down to watch some series on Netflix. I noticed a few days ago that while I used to experience the end of a series with '*horror vacui*', I am now reassured by the fact that Netflix's algorithm will no longer even give me the time to feel empty and desperate, as I did when I finished '*Breaking Bad*'. I will almost certainly immediately have a new algorithmic suggestion that is quite enticing. Between one great series and another, somewhat as in love stories, short adventures are interspersed, some enlightening, and others mere distractions from the fear of being without any distractions even for one evening".[5]

In this description shines through in all its poignancy the placid complicity that has been established between people and those new machinic devices propelled effectively and lurely by the network informational economy.[6] Then, speaking of this as a partnership with the machinic is certainly more honest and less cryptic as it emphasizes the action/intention of binding oneself to someone/something in order to generate or produce a beneficial outcome for us.

However, at the same time, being in a partnership should alert us to the fact that we are engaging in a relationship with other entities and this, ideally, would require alignment/respect for common goals and mutual control -instead, it is well known that one of the biggest problems that digital users experience is precisely the imbalance of power in favor of the opacity of algorithmic systems, which denote interest in remaining true black-boxes for us.[7] In other ways, the rise of algorithmic systems based on new AI software capable of building machines with their own agency projects partnership into new social territories with systemic effects on the whole community.

Conclusion

We do not know whether stimulated also by the fact that CEOs of these big-techs are normally received with full honors by the various political and religious representatives in the different countries of the world, but some scholars have wanted to outline their characteristics by comparing Google, Facebook, Apple, Netflix, etc. – but also the software systems involved in examining and possibly disbursing loans, hiring people, enforcing sentences or sentence discounts, preventing crimes, and so on – to real social institutions insofar as they are regulatory systems that guide behavior and apply responses at the individual level. Yet, compared to traditional and public institutions operating in democratic systems, the new algorithmic institutions – in which people, sometime even more effectively, experience real paths of socialization by readjusting ideas and practices – organize and move in complete autonomy, that is, not confronting in terms of justness and fairness with the broader society, except a posteriori, selectively and with great reluctance.

In short, at a time when digital life has become our normal life we have an urgent need to more pertinently describe and well-define what emerges – also in terms of language (Striph) - in order to take its dimension and refresh social theories, trying to provide explanatory frames for this human condition so inextricably intertwined with increasingly inter-penetrating machinic systems such as algorithmic ones.

The acknowledgement of their institutionalization certainly goes in this direction since no one can deny "the benefits of algorithms: often, they optimize scarce resources, they provide efficient services at scale, and they create ways to manage the modern world's complexity. However, when we look beyond the facades of technological efficiency and convenience, a more complex reality emerges. In many situations, algorithmic systems reproduce biases or forms of discrimination, increase inequalities, violate human-rights principles, and make decisions that cannot be explained".[8]

Faced with this reality, we have a duty to intervene with all the means that democracies make available to us to debate and fix things that are not working, as we strive to do with our other social institutions. In fact, we must think "that algorithms are not only changing existent institutions, but can, themselves, be conceived of as institutions in the extent to which they frame contexts of interactions, create pathways to development, inducing or constraining certain behaviours with collective consequences. Algorithms are reshaping the conditions for actions in many contexts, as they structure rules, norms, and meanings grounding social action".[9]

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Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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