

Ethicizing algorithms

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Roberto Simanowski. *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas*. Translation by Jefferson Chase. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018. 208 pp. ISBN: 978-0262536370

Roberto Simanowski has been studying the softwarization of culture for more than two decades. As founder and general editor of *Dichtung Digital*, an international, bilingual (German and English) journal for digital aesthetics started in 1999, he has charted the material and conceptual changes brought about by the use of software in the fields of art and literature.¹ This work bears witness to his interest not only in the development of a critical vocabulary for writing about digital artforms, but also to his continued concern with a critical pedagogy of the digital. His earlier works, some of which were published only in German, include *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry*, *Text Machines*, *Mapping Art*, and *Interactive Installations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), *Digitale Medien in der Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultur –*

¹ The journal published 44 issues between 1999 and 2014: <http://www.dichtung-digital.de/en/>.

Kunst – Utopie [Digital Media in the Society of Event: Culture, Art, Utopia] (Rowohlt, 2008), and *Interfictions: Vom Schreiben im Netz* [Interfictions: Writing on the Net] (Edition Suhrkamp, 2002).

During the 2010s, Simanowski's theoretical concerns expanded to include the forms and effects of digitization on diverse social practices, including the political and ethical implications of the massive automation of our symbolic exchanges and social interactions. Networked mobile media and cloud computing services became the infrastructure for the exponential datafication of human activity, opening up entire new fields of lived experience for exploitation, surveillance and control. 24/24 algorithmic collection and processing of datapoints – which defines our current media regime – raises questions that could hardly have been imagined in the days of stand-alone digital devices and do-it-yourself software tools. Simanowski's latest book, *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas* (2018; German edition, 2017), is part of a significant body of critical interventions that include *Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves* (2018; German edition 2016), *Digital Humanities and Digital Media: Conversations on Politics, Culture, Aesthetics, and Literacy* (2016, a series of interviews with major thinkers on digital technologies), and *Data Love: The Seduction and Betrayal of Digital Technologies* (2016; German edition, 2014).

The ethical issues and digital dilemmas outlined in Simanowski's new book originate in a troubling assessment of the ongoing global research and development programme for extending digital technologies to all spheres of human life. Thus digital capitalism, as a new stage in the material development of the current economic world system dominated by big data mega-corporations, combines with the emergence of digital states holding almost limitless power of surveillance and control. Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations about the collaboration between the USA National Security Agency and internet and telecommunication companies², Cambridge Analytica's social media profiling³, Google's unauthorized processing of millions medical records⁴, generalized surveillance of students' communications in American schools⁵ or

² James Ball, Julian Borger and Glenn Greenwald, "Revealed: how US and UK spy agencies defeat internet privacy and security." *The Guardian*, 6 September 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/05/nsa-gchq-encryption-codes-security>

³ Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach." *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

⁴ Ed Pilkington, "Google's secret cache of medical data includes names and full details of millions – whistleblower." *The Guardian*, 12 November 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/12/google-medical-data-project-nightingale-secret-transfer-us-health-information>

⁵ Lois Beckett, "Under digital surveillance: how American schools spy on millions of kids." *The Guardian*, 22 Oct 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/22/school-student-surveillance-bark-gaggle>

implementation of a social credit system in China⁶ are highly significant examples of how data and algorithms are creating new sets of social and political formations which undermine the social and political contract under which we have been living.

If, as seems clearer with each passing day, “[a]nything that can be measured will be measured, in the name of transparency, enlightenment, and truth” (viii-ix), then we should be able to define uses of those measurements in ways that protect our shared ethical values:

The ethicization of technology begins with the public in the domain of culture, where values and visions of civilization are negotiated, and aims at legal regulation as an institutional guarantee of our normative preferences. (xxiii)

Simanowski’s cogent argument about the need for the ethicization of digital technology is based on the analysis of its current and foreseeable uses, including facial recognition software, social media as filters and aggregators of information, the culture of instant gratification, practices of media education, systems of social ranking based on scores, disruption of labour rights caused by global service platforms, and self-driving cars.

Mark Zuckerberg’s manifesto “Building Global Community” (published on February 16, 2017)⁷ is the focus of the first chapter. The manifesto’s emphasis on technological transparency and interconnectivity as ways of addressing the social problems of globalization are analysed as a rhetorical diversion from Facebook’s relentless drive for capitalizing and controlling its users’ attention. The manifesto’s idealized description of a “civically-engaged community” of global scale contradicts the platforms’ in-built affordances for impoverishing public dialogue. Most social media conversations are restricted in scope and context, and the platform does not foster diversity of ideas in political conversations. Actual face-to-face conversations are devalued by the underlying logic of the platform, thus diminishing the quality of the citizens’ dialogue. The combination of filter bubbles, fake news and *like* buttons seems to have been designed to produce simplification, sensationalism and polarization. Although Zuckerberg recognizes the negative effects of social media (as “short-form medium where resonant messages get amplified many times”) in preventing nuance and encouraging oversimplification and polarization, the

⁶ Kelsey Munro, “China’s social credit system ‘could interfere in other nations’ sovereignty.” *The Guardian*, 27 June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/28/chinas-social-credit-system-could-interfere-in-other-nations-sovereignty>

⁷ Mark Zuckerberg, “Building Global Community.” *Facebook*, February 16, 2017 <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>

solution he has to offer is itself algorithmic. What is at stake, as Simanowski shows, are the conditions the platform imposes on its “global community” (7).

One of the premises of *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas* is that we do not yet understand the deep transformations that networked algorithmic processes are bringing about. The essence of digital technologies is revealing itself – i.e., the non-technological essence of technology according to the Heideggerian concept – in large-scale social and political changes that challenge fundamental ethic and legal principles of post-Enlightenment societies. Despite their scale and rapid pace, changes seem to take place without any full awareness and public discussion of their ethical implications. Simanowski is particularly alert to what he describes as “regressive progress” (x), i.e., the decoupling between technological and social progress which has characterized human history since the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. Social ranking and facial recognition algorithms are two examples of the extreme datafication of social life that call into question basic human rights. Considered in the light of the emancipated citizen and the public space fostered by prior media technologies, artificial intelligence systems script individual and social behaviours in ways that undermine the cherished principles of autonomy, privacy, liberty and self-determination.

Simanowski’s analysis of the death algorithm – which is programmed into a driverless car to enable it to decide, in an emergency, whether to plow into a group of pedestrians, a mother and child, or a brick wall – shows it as a telling symptom of the dominant utilitarian social engineering logic whose calculus of the value of human life contradicts established legal and ethical principles (chapter 7). Automation of a growing number of social functions and human processes results in the silent disruption of social relations, labour practices, and political structures. Humans become commodified into data-points that can be harvested and analysed for the creation of abstract value. This feedback loop between capturing behaviour through generated data and scripting behaviour through digital interfaces is changing the social fabric in ways that require a critical understanding of digitalization.

Most public policies of the last two decades have been concerned with extending digital literacy across social groups and geographic space. By creating the infrastructure required to offer universal network coverage, promoting digital tools and platforms, and introducing educational programs to foster the use of digital media, governments and teaching institutions have focused on what Simanowski describes as the “traffic cop” model of digital literacy (chapter 4). This model of digital literacy or “media competence” (51) is based on mastering the instrumental performance of the tool, but it falls short of providing the critical skills required for a full understanding of the nature and

ecology of the transformations and how they impact on democracy and individual rights, including privacy, work rights and data rights. This critical digital literacy is presented as the “criminal investigation” and citizenship model (63), that is, a practice concerned with the theoretical and philosophical understanding of the digitalization of society. Media education, crucial for the development of an ethics for the digital, has to be redesigned in this second sense if students and teachers are to use “technologies in socially responsive ways” (49).

The tone of the book is often polemical, sometimes offering anecdotal evidence based on the author’s encounters with “smombies” (smartphone zombies; chapter 2) and with Uber drivers in Rio de Janeiro and Hong Kong (chapter 6), but Simanowski is always lucid, engaging and eloquent in his arguments. Resorting to fictional dystopias in literature, film and television, and also to digital artworks (chapter 5), as a way of articulating the technological dilemmas we are currently facing, he writes with a sense of the urgency of addressing the momentous changes entailed by algorithmic culture. Given the amount of money to be invested in research on artificial intelligence over the coming decade (namely in the European Union, China, and the USA), and the nearly absent concern with the ethical and political implications of AI in most programmatic documents, *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas* should also be recommended reading for all policy makers and engineers who are obsessively inventing our digital future.