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If you search Google Images for the phrase “black girls,” the results today are significantly different from those of a few years ago. Thanks to some high-profile reporting on the subject, led by Safiya Umoja Noble’s work, the company has altered the algorithms used for image searches. Users can continue to believe that Google results are objective and unbiased, but as media reports regularly remind us, bias is built into the system. This is the focus of Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression*.

Safiya U. Noble is now an assistant professor in the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication (Noble 2018a). Prior to this, she was an assistant professor of information studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has written extensively on the intersection of digital media and society as well as on representations of race and gender in digital environments. *Algorithms of Oppression* is the product of more than six years of research.

As Google’s influence continues to shape society—and thus the university—it is important to be reminded that the coding used to organize and present knowledge, in both analog and digital form, is not free from human influence. Noble provides a succinct and thorough background on search-engine modes of construction and operation early in the text. Internet searching is based on the principles of library classification, and Noble problematizes this, pointing to “Yellow Peril” and “Jewish Question” historical Library of Congress subject headings. Even current LC subject headings are not unbiased, as evidenced by the heading “Women Accountants” that implies that women, as accountants, are considered aberrations. These same issues are present in search algorithms; Google bears the weight of scrutiny, given its current use for answering everything to the point of becoming a verb.

The main thesis of *Algorithms of Oppression* is that search engines and other digital tools are not objective presenters of information and that their underlying biases should be questioned. Perhaps most striking within this thesis is the reality that the broader social faith in the neutrality of Silicon Valley tech companies is unfounded.
By providing examples from various of these companies, Noble demonstrates how this misplaced faith is more damaging to anyone who is not white or male. This thesis is both timely within the context of movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter and socially contrarian in its accounting of the underlying digital structures that shape our social fabric. While ethics are starting to be discussed in relation to our digital environment (see Ash 2018 and Osnos 2018), the internet remains an anarchist’s utopia of commerce, propaganda, and yellow journalism (eye-catching headlines to raise viewership). Even as reports surface of artificial intelligence’s continuation of oppressive structures (see Groen 2018; Kleinman 2018; and Gatehouse 2018), computer programming still is held as de facto neutral, and thus good; Noble’s work offers a shift in that outlook.

While focused primarily on Google, Noble includes examples of other Silicon Valley missteps—notably the social-media company Snapchat’s “Bob Marley” and “Yellowface” filters (image distortions/overlays that altered the images to make the user appear as extreme caricatures, in this case as a Rastafarian and as a Chinese farmer, respectively) (Noble 2018b, 69). These filters were released in 2016; given the clear racial mockery involved, it is disappointing that, even so recently, this was seen as acceptable. The oppressive representations and stereotypes, then, are not merely limited to an inadvertent byproduct of the users of the media but endemic to the very systems themselves—the algorithms they run on and the people who actively create those algorithms.

Stylistically, Algorithms of Oppression manages to walk the fine line between academic and popular non-fiction writing. The language is clear, thoughtful, and engaging, and the subject matter and balanced use of images—often screen captures—make this an excellent book. The book is written primarily for an academic audience, and the writing style and content will appeal to those well beyond the academy. This is reflected in the source material, which includes works from bell hooks to blogs, offering contextualization to Noble’s original research.

One might be tempted to critique the book for its moment-in-time foundation (i.e., a Google Image search for “black girls” no longer returns pornography on the first page), and several have, including an outreach historian with IEEE (see Flaherty 2018). Such critiques fall short upon reading the text, as Noble directly addresses the rapid shifts in the face of public outcry both early on and in the conclusion, elucidating instead that while Google may rectify particular instances, the underlying systemic issues of oppression remain. That this critique has often come from those who have not read the text—and are often white and/or male—underscores, in depressing irony, the underlying problems of systemic racism and the unquestioned faith in the neutrality of digital structures that the text itself raises.
*Algorithms of Oppression* is not a comfortable book to read. It challenges many of the assumptions and interactions that we have with the behemoths that have come to dominate our day-to-day experience. It is an important book, however, and a necessary one for all those who question the giants in control of our communications media or who use information. As universities create policies and working groups for inclusion and diversity to grapple with their long-standing histories of exclusion while at the same time pushing forward the digital zeitgeist, this book is deeply important to academic libraries and librarians. We must be part of, if not leading, the dialogue, and this book offers the reasons why.

**References**


