

Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism

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Book Information

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Google has become synonymous with using the internet, but Google is not a perfect unbiased machine, and we should not be pretending that it is. The dominant idea that search results are objective or based on the popularity of links makes misogynistic or racist results appear normal and unavoidable, even when they have been debunked by scholars. Safiya Noble, an assistant professor of Information Studies at the University of California, has written a book called *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. The book intends to explain the ways that commercialization drives the consumption of Black women's and girls' representative identity on the internet. This consumption is promoted by search results that stereotype Black women's and girl's bodies as sexual objects and does not include their representation in certain professions, strengthening unconscious biases in the user. This affordable book would be a great addition to public and academic library collections.

The book covers a range of topics, matching its interdisciplinary nature, as it discusses the right to be forgotten, problems with Library of Congress Subject Headings, sexism, racism, colour blindness, technological racialization, and the concept of “prosumerism”, in which the user is the product. It is a surprising amount of information in such a short book. It all started with a Google search that Noble performed in September of 2011 for “Black girls”, where the first results were pornographic. The book is filled with screenshots of her searches, tying the specific date, phrase, and results together. Noble goes through a series of examples of technological racialization like Google’s autosuggest. Noble’s search in 2013 of “why are Black Women so” has a list of autosuggestions like “angry, loud, mean, attractive, lazy, annoying.” She also searched Google images, looking up “doctor” in April 2016, which featured images of mostly white men as the dominant representation. These examples culminate in Noble asking the key rhetorical question of this book: if the software engineers are not responsible for their own algorithms then who is? Especially when Google denies racial stereotyping, but then can fix abnormalities after they have been pointed out. For example, a tweet from 2016 showed that searching “three black teenagers” on Google images resulted in photos of mugshots, while searching “three white teenagers” had stock photos appear. After this tweet, Google image results had a mugshot of white teenagers.

Noble blends her own encounters with racism and sexism with the studies and articles that she is discussing. This has a dual purpose, as the personal touch makes the book easier to read and less like a textbook with dry academic language, but it also ensures that the reader knows the human impact of experience with the web as an uneven playing field. Noble’s book is a tough but necessary read.

Conflict of Interest Statement

None declared.