

Book Review

Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism

By Safiya Umoja Noble

New York: New York University Press. 2018. 256 pages. <https://nyupress.org/books/9781479837243/>

Reviewer: Michael L. Rosino, *University of Connecticut*

To maximize the impact of our field, sociologists must continue to write books that are accessible, explain problems of wide familiarity and concern, and empower their audiences toward action and awareness. By tackling a facet of current digital technology that has become so deeply engrained in our lives as to often feel like a part of our brains and bodies, Safiya Umoja Noble has accomplished just that feat. Just consider how often we find ourselves searching for answers and information online, sometimes almost habitually, whether where to eat, what's going on in the world, or to gain knowledge and facts about a place, person, idea, or group. For some of us, typing “[google.com](https://www.google.com)” (or maybe even just a “g” and relying on autocomplete) seems to be a matter of muscle memory rather than cognitive effort. Yet as Noble convincingly demonstrates, search engines are not simply neutral tools for mindlessly completing tasks. Without substantial reform and restructuring, they are also a source of immense social power and financial domination, and ultimately, mechanisms of ongoing oppression.

As a sociologist with digital leanings in my teaching and research, I approached this text with great interest. Nearly every semester for the past few years, I have used a simple exercise to demonstrate the concept of controlling images (see [Collins 2000](#)) to undergraduate students. I show a series of terms accompanied by the top images that come up in Google Image Search: “masculine,” “feminine,” “nerd,” “leader,” etc. I then engage students in discussion over the racialized, classed, and gendered undertones of these images. The lesson is not about technology per se but rather intended to demonstrate that it is not simply stories or even ideas that naturalize forms of oppression but also the symbols, concepts, characteristics, and images pervasively associated with groups in dominant culture. I remind students that they are seeing the encoding of human social biases into technology via pervasive and patterned associations between words and images. I leave it at reminding them that the precise innerworkings of search engines remain just outside of my expertise.

I have long suspected that the sociological implications of such algorithms go much deeper. Yet, I lacked the theoretical frameworks and comprehensive data analysis to truly bring them to light both for myself and for my students. Cue the pathbreaking and prescient *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. For not only instructors, but also activists, policy makers, and scholars, this book will quickly cement a position in helping supplement and deepen these discussions.

Noble's entre into the consequences of search engines for the lives of oppressed groups follows a similar tack, noticing that search engine results have a way of symbolically dehumanizing them. The book recounts an early observation which Noble refers to as the "pornification" of Black women and girls on Google. Based on comments from a friend, Noble conducted a Google search on "black girls" only to reveal a trove of pornographic sites. Clearly, this observation holds a deep resonance with historical controlling images of the Black woman as a "jezebel" as explored by Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Yet, this example is not a disturbing anomaly but rather just one case of what Noble terms "oppressive algorithms." These include a bevy of processes that impact the dispersal of information about events and issues, the circulation and amplification of dehumanizing and damaging cultural representations, and even the reinforcement of oppressed groups' exclusion from emergent digitally dependent markets. This case study approach is well suited for accessibility and breadth of scope as the book intends to theorize some relevant mechanisms and inform discussions and efforts at social change.

Taking a black feminist approach combined with an understanding of information technology and a fine-grained attention to digital divides and inequalities, the book is brimming with insights about the intersection of technology, culture, and systems of oppression. Noble is not simply interested in deconstructing the dominant imagery or stereotypes that circulate digital media. The book explores google searches about Black women and girls, information cataloging about instances of racist violence, and the racialized outcomes of business-based algorithms such as Yelp toward a larger critical and emancipatory project. The manuscript represents a "practical project" (Noble 2018, p. 13) to spur social change such that the algorithms so tightly bound to our everyday practices work to the broad benefit of humanity rather than the reinforcement of exclusion and inequity.

The book weaves an intricate web of cases and concepts in clear prose. Throughout the text deeper interconnections are revealed. We find commentary and analysis of the commodification of information and the monopolistic position of Google over access to information and engagement in digital communication. The book also examines, in depth, how racist and sexist animus becomes encoded into the seemingly trustworthy and neutral logic of searches due to the popularity of such messages and images and the ways in which neoliberal capitalism creates perverse incentives to perpetuate the status quo simply because it is profitable to major tech companies.

The book's most significant contribution is in painstakingly demonstrating how uncritical applications of modern algorithmic technology can facilitate and

even obfuscate microdecisions that maintain racial oppression. As Noble (2018, p. 167) remarks, “never before has it been so easy to set a school rating in a digital real estate application such as [Zillow.com](https://www.zillow.com) to preclude the possibility of going to ‘low rated’ schools, using data that reflects the long history of separate but equal, underfunded schools in neighborhoods where African Americans and low-income people live.” Along these lines, it is the elucidation of “technological redlining” that readers will find perhaps most enlightening and troubling while absorbing this probing analysis, clearly staking out crucial territory for future research and practice.

Reference

- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.