



## Editorial

# Algorithmic Governance

## Fantasies of Social Control

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Social bots, deep fakes, document fraud, fake news, propaganda, spam, lies, hoaxes, disinformation and deception. In the digital era of *surveillance capitalism* (Zuboff 2019), the sources and means of deception and make-believe proliferate as do the means of *social sorting*, *targeting*, and *profiling* (Bauman and Lyon 2013). They threaten to create a world where distinguishing between the fake and the real, truth and lie, machine and human, becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible. A world where making these distinctions becomes an obsessive preoccupation – a preoccupation that replaces critical thinking with fact-checking, Truth-O-Meters, and audit, openness with borders and gates, trust with transparency and control, and the politics of citizenship with identity management. Paradoxically, the very source of our confusion – the massive flow of data and new technologies – are also touted as the very solution. Data is marketed as neutral, as pure – as the ‘truth’, it bears the promise of controlling the uncertain world (Hong 2020), and predict the often unpredictable, such as social outcomes. The results of data-driven predictions, of algorithmic decisions, of opaque artificial intelligence systems are labelled as ‘evidence’ and ‘intelligence’ – as something ‘solid’ and hard in ‘liquid times’ (Bauman 2000, Bauman and Lyon 2013), as something to reliably build our lives on, as well as our organizations and governance. And yet, we know well that raw and pure data is an oxymoron (Gitelman 2013); context is erased as ‘data’ becomes de-contextualized and consequently re-contextualized in statistical models and algorithms we are to rely on.

This obsession with data-driven ‘truth’ and governance, and the monetization of this ‘new oil’ of personal information and individuals digital footprint, generates new forms of harm and injustices. It sacrifices privacy, rights, liberties, the presumption of innocence, and due process on the altar of security (O’Neil 2016, Benjamin 2019) – and with it, more often than not, security itself. This obsession threatens to create a world where the omnipresent corporate and governmental surveillance (the two increasingly blurred) and the continual manufacturing and mediatization of new threats, risks, and fear feeds societal paranoia, generalized suspicion and mistrust (Frosh 2016). Everyone is a potential fraud or fake; nobody can be trusted. Distrust is institutionalized. This, paradoxically, again provides legitimacy to the very system that simultaneously manufactures both risks and threats and solutions to these risks. In the name of safety, security, efficiency and even transparency, we are to accept real-time minute surveillance, be it in the public space, workplaces, or even our own increasingly ‘smart’ homes – and we are to accept that these systems not only monitor us, but also rank us, sort us, evaluate us and punish us. We can take here the example of Amazon’s AI cameras that are punishing and effectively cutting wages of drivers for mistakes that they did not make, but that are nonetheless flagged by the ‘smart’ surveillance device manufactured by the tech start-up Netradyne.

Artificial intelligence, deep learning and big data analytics are viewed as *the* technologies of the future, capable of delivering *expert* intelligence decisions, risk assessments and predictions within milliseconds. Accurate or not, algorithms are transforming our societies, with profound consequences. Corporations have been investing in AI and harvesting enormous amounts of data to increase their profits by perfecting predictive consumerism, monitoring of their employees, ad targeting, or credit score ratings, while cutting costs. Governments have been equally eager to collaborate with the private sector, invest in new AI technologies for predictive policing, and military intelligence, and enter ever new cross-sector partnerships in the name of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, data-driven decision making and forecasting, and streamlining of the workflow in public administration and services; in this sense, the technologies embody more than anything the visions of New Public Management. Jeremy Bentham’s ideas on governance as much as the panopticon come to a new expression through algorithmic governance (Bowrey and Smark 2010), which can be defined as follows:

Algorithmic governance has many faces: it is seen as ordering, regulation and behaviour modification, as a form of management, of optimisation and of participation. Depending on the research area it is characterised by inscrutability, the inscription of values and interests, by efficiency and effectiveness, by power asymmetry, by social inclusiveness, new exclusions, competition, responsiveness, participation, co-creation and overload. For most observers, governance

becomes more powerful, intrusive and pervasive with algorithmization and datafication (Katzenbach & Ulbricht 2019: 11).

While the risks associated with AI are typically downplayed or reduced to ‘the effects on the labour market’, we are already seeing the contours of the societal effects of using AI models and automated decision making with inherent bias – such as in the welfare systems in the UK and US (Eubanks 2018), or in predictive policing across an increasing number of countries (Kaufmann, Egbert et al. 2018) – AI models that not merely reproduce existing societal and systemic inequities but magnify them in the manner of self-fulfilling prophecy, and put them fully into system, resulting in ‘technological redlining’ (Benjamin 2019) while clearing from its way *human* discretion. Despite these challenges, and driven by tech-optimism and fears of missing out and falling on diverse rankings measuring levels of digitization, governments have been eager to collaborate with the private sector and invest in AI systems for improved and more efficient public administration, new AI technologies for (predictive) policing, and military intelligence.

This special issue contributes to these recent debates and explores both the promises of social control that underpin these technologies and their effects, while also unpacking the underlying bureaucratic logic which predates datafication and that can be related to the particular forms of construction of knowledge, facts and evidence through databases, lists, and other forms of sorting and ordering of the world. **Guro Huby** and **John Harries** investigate in their article *Bloody Paperwork: Algorithmic Governance and Control in UK Integrated Health and Social Care Settings* the ways in which paperwork and everyday care work becomes transformed into big data which in turn enables data-driven governance. The authors manage to bring forth the complexities and ambiguities of experiences of the staff with the ‘bloody paperwork’ as it becomes datafied and as it turns into a separate object, outside of everyday care work, becoming at times alienating and even frustrating and at other times facilitating. **Pernille Hohnen**, **Michael Alexander Ulfstjerne** and **Mathias Sosnowski Krabbe** present an interesting comparative study of credit score systems in Denmark and the United States in their article *Assessing Creditworthiness in the Age of Big Data*, which points not only to the ways in which algorithms are used in credit scoring, how these practices differ across different jurisdictions and cultures, how algorithms shape temporality and sociality, and how credit assessments turn behavioral data into personalized scores and credit trajectories, but also to how we can think about and study this anthropologically. **Karl Kristian Larsson** and **Marit Haldar** look critically in their article *Can Computers Automate Welfare? Norwegian Efforts to Make Welfare Policy More Effective* at the expectations that policymakers have regarding the benefits of digital government and contrast these with the pragmatic decisions and choices that underpin automated welfare, showing that even in tasks that appear rather straightforward and at first sight easy to automate, rights of some can for instance become negatively affected. The authors also point to how relations of

trust between citizens and government become impacted in multiple ways. **Sofie Doorman** and **Brunilda Pali** explore in their article *Underneath the Promise of Safety and Security in a ‘Smart City’: An Ethnographic Study of Eindhoven’s Living Lab Stratumseind* the fantasies and promises of security and governance mediated by algorithmic technologies that underpin the drive towards smart cities. Diving into the concrete case of the Living Lab Stratumseind, the authors point to the ways in which surveillance and algorithms can remain invisible for some, usually those not flagged by these systems, while potentially becoming intensely felt by others who may have little recourse to justice as responsibility is evaded and as discriminatory practices are algorithmically reinforced rather than challenged. They conclude with an important statement, namely that ‘The reduction and simplification of social life into patterns and anomalies bring with it a significant impoverishment of our social and political imagination. The market driven priorities in smart technology development clearly conflict with social priorities; therefore, public institutions should resist prioritizing market objectives to the detriment of social ones’ (ibid. 105). **Shivangi Narayan** argues in her article *Guilty Until Proven Guilty: Policing Caste Through Preventive Policing Registers in India* that we should not underestimate the ways in which data-driven predictive policing builds on, extends, and accelerates well-established bureaucratic practices such as the keeping and maintenance of paper-based registers for predictive policing in India, showing that these paper-based registers can be analyzed as instances of ‘policing caste’ and as fundamentally discriminatory even when presented as ‘neutral’; digital registers have the potential to further amplify this underlying bias. Neither paper-based nor data-driven predictive policing is neutral or objective, rather, prediction becomes too often nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy and, in this case, caste prejudice.

This special issue features also three book reviews: **Kira Vrist Rønn** has reviewed a fascinating book on predictive policing written by Simon Egbert and Matthias Leese, titled *Criminal Futures: Predictive Policing and Everyday Police Work*. You can also listen to a podcast episode 2 of *Black Box by the Algorithmic Governance Research Network*, which is a conversation about this book between the authors and Tereza Ø. Kuldova. **Sigurd M. N. Oppegaard** has reviewed the book *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation* written by Jason E. Smith, addressing among others the relation between automation and the servant economy. **Lukas Mozdeika** has reviewed the fascinating book *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media* by Matthew Flisfeder, forcing us to rethink the ‘social’ in social media.

We are also pleased to share an interesting interview on anarchist criminology, fitting for a special issue on governance, conducted by **Václav Walach** with the criminologists **Mark Seis** and **Stanislav Vysotsky**.

We are delighted to share with you this extremely rich and exciting special issue. We would like to express our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their

thorough engagement and critical work with all the contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*. And thank *you* for reading!

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