dis—obey

Questions, considerations and reflections on possible disobedience in the context of artificial intelligence and algorithmic power

Algorithms shape human behavior on an individual and societal scale. They influence not only the aesthetic reception of the world, but also the well-being and social interaction of its users. They act in a political context (e.g. through the dissemination of fake news), intervene in concrete social situations (e.g. in public space) and influence individual behaviour in private, social and political situations. They are not always a neutral companion, but an actor who can not only consciously manipulate (after all, an algorithm has a task and a goal), but can also unconsciously act sexist and racist. Without wanting to make an exact prognosis, it can be assumed that the influence of algorithms on individual and social behaviour will continue to increase. Therefore, it is necessary to look at them increasingly not only from the perspective of computer science, but to discuss their influence and consequences from multiple perspectives, such as politics, activism, sociology, education, philosophy, ethics, psychology, journalism, arts and design. From the perspective of human-computer-interaction, algorithms are not a technical fact, but an adaptive design artifact.

Thus, algorithms are not to be regarded as a technical structure, but as a social phenomenon — they embed themselves, currently still very subtle and not very transparent, into our political and social system. This should — as with other social topics in the context of technological and social developments — evoke a critical examination (or even an active resistance if necessary) of them. While various aspects of possible problems of algorithmic power — in the context of computer science, for example, the algorithmic bias or the weaknesses of deep learning, in ethics the question of autonomous decision-making, in media theory the aesthetic influence, etc. — have already been and still are the subject of scientific discourse, the question of possible disobedience in particular rarely seems to be the focus of attention, although every form of exercise of power should offer strategies for disobedience. Especially the consideration of disobedience can — as art history or political activism, for example, show — influence the discourse by bringing the problem into focus first: Thus, early strategies of disobedience can be seen as early forms of problem recognition.

Disobedience in this digital context means not only the question of possible strategies of resistance — although these are of course of great interest — but also the discussion in principle about a possible limitation of algorithmic power. When a new actor can exert such a great influence on individual and social processes, this naturally raises questions for politics and the judiciary, but also, for example, for educational sciences. If a black box (as deep learning is accompanied by the fact that in the end it is no longer transparent how the algorithm works) acts autonomously, then a discussion in the context of disobedience can be to demand or design forms of transparency here (which does not only concern computer science, but also design, media etc.). The discussion on algorithmic power is primarily intended to generate a debate on how to deal with it: In a time of radical digital progress and the constant evolution of adaptive algorithms, strategies for possible disobedience must be worked out and discussed — in order to be able to deduce possible consequences for the handling of algorithms in the respective field.

The topics of »Obey« and »Disobey« thus cover issues that are located in very divergent scientific fields. »Obey« and »Disobey« are to be seen as poles between which questions and reflections and the possible disobedience can be located, because ultimately obedience and disobedience are naturally interdependent actions. Under »Obey« the general algorithmic power and the resulting questions can be discussed: How are algorithms formed and how is their power constituted? What happens when algorithms simplify complexity? What influence do intelligent algorithms have in the respective subject area and what problems are created by them? How do algorithms shape human behavior in the respective context? In which contexts and areas explicit and implicit obedience to algorithms has led our society into serious problems in the past? Under »Disobey« questions about how to deal with this algorithmic power and strategies for disobedience can be discussed: Which methods of algorithmic disobedience exist and can be transferred if necessary? Which tools and methods can be used to break the algorithmic power? In which contexts, within which groups and in which areas of application disobedience has been successfully applied?

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call for abstracts

Possible subject areas and possible questions are for example:

Politics/Justice
Obey — What influence do algorithms have on the practical design of our future society? Does legislative competence move from the state to the companies (providers of the algorithms)? What influence can adaptive algorithms have in democratic processes?
Disobey — How can a state react to global and sometimes invisible actors? What are strategies for dealing with political influence through algorithms?

Activism
Obey — What role can algorithms play in the context of political control?
Disobey — How can political resistance or protest assert itself in the context of algorithmic power (also for example in the context of surveillance tools, face recognition, etc.)?

Sociology/Gender Studies
Obey — How do algorithms change our social structures and processes? How do algorithms shape or manifest gender-specific behavior or a possible injustice?
Disobey — How can algorithmic bias be abolished or combated? How can the power of algorithms be decoupled from individual well-being?

Education
Obey — What role play algorithms in the education of children? What is the tension between the training of skills and the freedom of the individuals?
Disobey — In which learning processes is it essential to question and reflect on structured instructions? How can the instruction to disobedience lead to positive learning effects?

Journalism
Obey — What are the limits of the fourth power with regard to the transparency of algorithms?
Disobey — How can the media deal with adaptive algorithms in opinion forming?

Philosophy/Ethics/Psychology
Obey — What influence do algorithms with their supposed neutrality have on morality and ethics? Is digital space a form of heterotopia?
Disobey — To what extent does disobedience to algorithms give them meaning? How can we interact with autonomous but intransparent machines? Which aspects and properties of algorithms promote trust in these algorithms?

Art/Design
Obey — What influence do algorithms have on the aesthetic development of a society? What is the future state of the symbiosis of man and algorithm?
Disobey — How can a critical approach to artificial intelligence be reflected in design processes? Which strategies from social design or even critical design can be transferred?

Call for Abstracts!
For a publication on this topic — to be published next year as an anthology — we are looking for contributions that deal with questions of this kind. We are especially interested in contributions that leave the field of computer science and look at the problem from a different scientific perspective. **We welcome abstracts (approx. 750–1,500 words) until September 30, 2020.**

Contact
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