Algorithmic Exclusion: Countering Discriminatory Blockades of LGBTQ Content Online
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While researchers have documented how artificial intelligence reflects and reinforces racist practices (Noble 2018), consolidates control in corporate hands (Pasquale 2016), and perpetuates structural inequalities (Eubanks 2017), less is known about how online algorithms—and, more generally, automated decision-making—contribute to homophobia and transphobia and impede efforts to promote LGBTQ inclusion and equality.

This chapter draws on data from a variety of sources—including GLAAD, Index on Censorship, The Internet Society, and UCLA’s Williams Institute—to provide a systematic assessment of how digital algorithms impact LGBTQ communities and public attitudes toward LGBTQ people. We advocate algorithmic literacy, transparency, and oversight as important but often overlooked means to forestall the disturbing resurgence of homophobia and continuing transphobia in the contemporary United States.

Algorithms, which predate computers, have become pervasive, invisible, and discriminatory in the digital age. From the search engines we use to access information online and the feeds of our social media accounts to targeted advertising and even models that aim to predict future crimes, algorithms play a ubiquitous role in our everyday lives. Nevertheless, most people are in the dark about how algorithms work and the threats they pose, because user interfaces mask their operation and designers typically claim proprietary rights to these codes. The ubiquity of algorithms combined with lack of public understanding poses serious social problems because researchers have shown that algorithms reflect and reinforce biases and inequalities (e.g., Pasquale 2016, Eubanks 2017, Noble 2018).

LGBTQ online-content providers and independent news outlets have drawn attention to how global media platforms blacklist LGBTQ-related keywords and content in the name of “brand safety”; how search engines prioritize alt-right, anti-gay news sites; how YouTube has demonetized channels featuring LGBTQ content; and how TikTok moderation guidelines censor pro-LGBTQ content. Algorithmic censorship creates a blockade of access to information related to LGBTQ issues and it throttles online communication among members of those communities.

We investigate connections between this blockade and negative trends in LGBTQ acceptance and tolerance, as documented in recent studies by GLAAD, GLSEN, and others. GLAAD’s Accelerating Acceptance Index (2019) indicates that American millennials and Gen Zers report being less comfortable across a variety of social interactions with members of the LGBTQ community; GLSEN’s National Climate Survey reports that progress in making schools safer for LGBTQ students has slowed for the first time in years. Furthermore, hate crimes motivated by homophobia or transphobia have risen, as documented by federal agencies.

Algorithmic literacy is more important than ever, given the increasingly prominent role of algorithms in the circulation of news and information, and the shaping of public opinion—including, especially, attitudes toward marginalized groups. We cannot rely on global media platforms, including Google, TikTok, and Facebook, to resolve the problems caused by algorithms. To counter online content blocking that does harm to LGBTQ people and communities, we recommend steps to improve algorithmic awareness and accountability.
Works Cited:


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