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Toward a popular theory of algorithms

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ABSTRACT

This paper establishes dialogs between theories on the popular and critical studies on algorithms and datafication. In doing so, it contributes to reversing the analytical tendency to assume that algorithms have universal effects and that conclusions about "algorithmic power" in the Global North apply unproblematically everywhere else. We begin by clarifying how Latin American scholars and other research traditions have theorized the popular ("*lo popular*"). We then develop four dimensions of *lo popular* to implement these ideas in the case of algorithms: playful cultural practices, imagination, resistance, and "in-betweenness." We argue that this dialogue can generate different ways of thinking about the problems inherent to algorithmic mediation by drawing attention to the remixes of cultural practices, imaginative solutions to everyday problems, "cyborg" forms of resistance, and ambiguous forms of agency that are central to the operations of algorithmic assemblages nowadays.

Introduction

Critical algorithm studies have done a remarkable job at demonstrating how algorithmic biases are a constitutive part of today's digital ecology (Benjamin, 2019). These studies have shown how algorithms often reproduce and amplify sexist, patriarchal, racist, and classist biases. Building on these insights, scholars in the Global South have increasingly turned their attention to algorithms. Research in Latin America has focused on the emergence of models of algorithmic governance and how these have worsened inequalities across the region (Barreneche, Bermúdez, & Martín, 2021; Bruno, Cardoso, Kanashiro, Guilhon, & Melgaço, 2019; Silva, 2020).

Despite the growth of critical algorithm studies in the Global South and their manifold contributions, a tendency persists to assume that conclusions about the power of algorithms in the Global North apply unproblematically everywhere else. In a typical statement, García Canclini (2020) noted:

> the opacity of algorithms and the transparency of our data [...] [call] into question our ability to function as citizens. [...] [This] should lead to more radical questions than in any previous time about the type of hegemony that is being installed. In the old Gramscian distinction, hegemony differed from domination by not being a simple imposition. (pp. 81-82)