

Systemic Oppression of the Digital Age

When search engines were first created, they were created as a neutral tool to help bridge people towards information. However, as Google took over, it began shaping the perception of the people that were using it. Google's creation and overtaking of the internet was no less than a miracle, revolutionizing the way people sought out information by making it seamless and easy to reach sources with whatever description the user wanted. Nevertheless, in this current era, with great ideas comes a large monetization issue where endless greed takes over for the want of generating as much profit as possible at the expense of the consumers. Thus, using their search engine allowed for people to prioritize which results came up first or more often if people paid for it, or more specifically if corporations paid for it. As such, many undesirable results would pop up, being either straight racist, misogynistic, or plain wrong. This pushes a false narrative towards the user and as such would influence the users on the platform. Furthermore, this feeds into the two terms brought up by the author being "algorithmic oppression" and "technological redlining." We can examine it further by using different ethical lenses to analyze the narrative brought up by the author. Through a careful analysis of Noble's arguments under the lens of Kantianism and contractualism, we can see the immoral stance of these systemically oppressive algorithms.

The Google search engine has come a long way since it first began, but that doesn't mean we should look past what it has done in its past, and that is exactly what the author is trying to say. Up until the book was written, the Google search engine has continued to further induce this "algorithmic oppression". This "algorithmic oppression" that the author speaks of is basically that the algorithm is not neutral and actually biased in this case, where using such a service will harm groups or misrepresent these people by bringing certain results for people of color, and for women also certain results that objectify them. Starting with how women are portrayed on the search engine, Noble says "The results retrieved two years into this study, in 2011, representing Asian girls, Asian Indian girls, Latina girls, White girls, and so forth reveal the ways in which girls' identities are commercialized, sexualized, or made curiosities within the gaze of the search engine (71)." During this time, the first results that you would get for these different race women would all lead to different pornographic sites. This since then has changed, but it still took around two years. These results had targeted half of the world's population by objectifying them in this way for online viewers and hurting the female population for misrepresenting them in this sort of way.

Moving onto another group that is heavily under attack by the Google search engine would be the African American male population. Here is a quote from the book about one user who searched up almost identical search terms with just one minor tweak, yet the results are drastically different:

On June 6, 2016, Kabir Ali, an African American teenager from Clover High School in Midlothian, Virginia, tweeting under the handle

@iBeKabir, posted a video to Twitter of his Google Images search on the keywords “three black teenagers.” The results that Google offered were of African American teenagers’ mug shots, insinuating that the image of Black teens is that of criminality. Next, he changed one word— “black” to “white”— with very different results. Three white teenagers” were represented as wholesome and all- American. (80)

This is just another case of them misrepresenting young African-American males and this isn’t the only case since there’s another case where Google’s search engine and facial recognition would pull up results for apes for black males or vice versa. These are just one of the many cases where Google has really wronged the African-American young male population with these discriminatory pictures or misrepresentations of them that aren’t even remotely true. The search engine having problems aren’t just because of the engineers behind it, but rather this systematic way of tearing down these groups of people and attacking them under the guise of error. Furthermore, that these sorts of things shouldn’t be happening in the first place, yet they continue to happen throughout Google’s lifespan and currently to this day albeit not to the common eye.

The Google search engine in of itself is a product and as such commercialized in a way that big companies can exploit or take advantage of the search engine and this ties into the previous paragraph about “algorithmic oppression” which in this paragraph is technological redlining. The reason in which these female populations are being targeted and being commercialized by the porn industry is because the porn industry paid for these kinds of results and it is further enhanced by the public clicking on them causing a cycle for this to grow out of control. Noble mentions that “searches for the word “Jew,” which included a significant number of anti- Semitic pages. As can be seen by Google’s response to the results of a keyword search for “Jew,” Google takes little responsibility (42).” This is one of the cases where such power from other sources are able to take influence within this place and Google who should have the authority to stop this won’t actually do it because of the profit that they can receive for hosting the websites. To further back up this claim here is another quote from later in the page “Google, according to its own disclaimer, will only remove pages that are considered unlawful, as is the case in France and Germany, where selling or distributing neo- Nazi materials is prohibited (42).” So it is the case that they are definitely capable of removing these websites from appearing but refuse to do so for reasons probably pertaining to greed and money making. So this technological redlining comes from the fact they will allow this to happen all for the pursuit of profit rather than stopping the spread of misinformation and hate towards different groups of people.

One of the lenses we can use with which to analyze algorithmic oppression is through Kantianism. This is the ethical framework constructed by Immanuel Kant that has many ethical implications. There is a primary focus on moral duties and intentions rather than explicit outcomes that we see in utilitarianism. The main ideas to consider in this framework are universalizability, moral intention (good will), and means versus ends. Universalizability is the

“test” that validates if a principle is indeed morally sound. If a rule is applied inconsistently among people, it fails the universalizability test and thus is not morally sound. Kantian ethics also emphasize the importance of good will, so the intentions behind moral decisions must be positively motivated for the sake of general good will. Finally, Kant emphasizes that people should never be means to an end but rather the ends themselves. That is to say people must have their dignity intact and cannot be compromised for gains that hurt or demean said people.

The breach of universalizability is quite clear. Noble’s entire point is that search engines (particularly Google’s) are biased and as such, negatively affect many people. In the book, she says “Search results, in the context of commercial advertising companies, lay the groundwork... for implicit bias: bias that is buttressed by advertising profits (116).” Based on the issue of the profit motive, search engines are very biased toward the whims of advertising companies due to the lucrative revenue derived from specific search results. This is a clear failure of Kant’s universalizability test. Without consistent and fair practices, the rules that Google sets for users are not moral based on Kantian principles. Skewed results that lead to discrimination are entirely the opposite of universalizability.

Regarding the issue of the profit motive, the question of good will is immediately compromised. While these services may provide many benefits, such as ease of information that can be accurate, that is not the point of Kantian ethics. The will is what matters here, not the outcomes. Noble describes that “What we find when we search on racial and gender identities is profitable to Google, as much as what we find when we search on racist concepts (116).” Many of the results we find are expected to be accurate. Search engines are often touted as arbiters of truth, yet Noble has illuminated that there is a clear motive for capital gain. This motive directly impacts the results given, which as we have seen are often very discriminatory towards marginalized groups. Good will is not something that a company can claim to have if such greedy desires sway their decisions, especially at the cost of people’s integrity.

On the final note of personal integrity, we begin to see that Google’s search engine is treating people as a means to the end of gaining wealth. In fact, this is so core to the algorithm’s purpose that even those who are not typically affected by the engine’s discrimination are impacted. Noble indicates the importance of Google’s practices by saying that “The vertical offerings of Google are so great... that mere use of any of these “free” tools creates billion-dollar profits for Google—profits generated from both unpaid labor from users and the delivery of audiences to advertisers (162).” Google offers a “service” that is really a means to train off of the user base. Can personal integrity really be preserved when the users themselves are the sole reason the company is making a profit? These are not even small gains. As Noble said, these are billions of dollars gained at the expense of people. Profiting off of a user base does not build a case for people being ends rather than means. Putting it simply, Google generating their main source of revenue from the user base, which we have seen they often misrepresent and harm, clearly violates the Kantian principle of treating individuals as ends in themselves.

The final lens with which we can inspect the notion of these search algorithms acting as systemic oppression is through contractualism. Broadly speaking, contractualism refers to the

ethical concept that moral decisions can be made on the basis of a social contract in which all people involved can rationally agree to following. A classic example is a simple promise: agreeing to keep a promise means one is “contractually” bound to keeping said promise, even if they may not wish to do so. There are three specific concepts of contractualism that will be relevant for our analysis: John Locke’s tacit consent, John Rawls’ hypothetical consent, and T.M. Scanlon’s unreasonable rejection. Tacit consent refers to the notion that by participating in a society or system, one implicitly consents to the rules or “contract” that are enforced in said system. Hypothetical consent is a thought experiment where anyone can start by assuming they will know nothing about their life prior to birth. Under this “veil of ignorance”, would they consent to the contract that would govern much of their lives? If so, then they are giving hypothetical consent. Finally, if one cannot find a logical, reasonable reason to reject a social contract, then the presence of only “unreasonable” rejections means someone should follow the proposed contract.

Under tacit consent, one would expect users of Google’s search engine to be contractually bound to the rules Google sets as they made the engine itself. The key problem with this is the major power imbalance between Google and the marginalized. In the text, Noble mentions that “Search algorithms also function within the context of education: they are embedded in schools, libraries, and educational support technologies. They function in relationship to popular culture expressions such as “just Google it,” ... Search algorithms function as an artifact of culture (85).” From this, it is clear that Google’s search engine exists as far more than just a simple tool. It has become so pervasive that simply choosing to not utilize it is impractical. Many marginalized people have no choice but to use this search engine and be subject to the prejudices the engine presents. Furthermore, simply not using this engine does not prevent others from using it. Thus, even if one avoids using this engine, they will certainly still be negatively affected by the discrimination it brings about in other people.

From the notion of hypothetical consent, it is logical to deduce that most would not give such consent given the state of search engine bias. Noble explains that these services provide a nuanced notion of injury that is separate from simply a physical injury. She explains that “But Ingram is arguably defining “injury” a little too narrowly. Searching for “Latinas” or “Asian women” brings about results that focus on porn, dating, and fetishization (161).” The framing of these search results as injuries is particularly illuminating. Under hypothetical consent, how could one consent to a service that debases and humiliates someone? Under the veil of ignorance, one must consider the possibility where they too can be affected by these injuries. In this instance, consenting hypothetically to these moral standards becomes dubious at best and erroneous at worst.

Finally, we consider the idea of unreasonable rejection. Noble frames the idea that many African Americans have little control over their portrayal in the media. She cites ideas from professor Michele Wallace, by stating that “[there is a] crisis in lack of management, design, and control that Black people have over the production of commercial culture. She [Wallace] states that under these conditions, Black people will be “perpetual objects of contemplation, contempt,

derision, appropriation, and marginalization.” (165)” This is a similar concern with hypothetical consent. In cases where marginalized people not only lose their ability to control their image but also their status in the greater society, who would not reject these social contracts? It is certainly reasonable to reject a contract that does not protect one’s integrity and image. A social contract cannot claim to be moral when it does not guarantee to protect the rights of everyone involved, or at the very least this large minority of marginalized people.

Throughout our analysis, we have seen how Noble has clearly articulated the problematic effects of Google’s search engine bias, dubbed as “algorithmic oppression” and “technological redlining.” Under the viewpoints of Kantianism and contractualism, we can really peek into the problems that Noble really brings up along with what motives there are with the Google search engine. For some, they must use the Google search engine even though as we have seen through Kantianism that it violates the overall good. For the pursuit of profit for the company or the good of the people it is obvious what Google has decided to choose, but for a better future we believe that with Noble’s argument that there should be change to the search engine system to do it for the people rather than for profit gain. Positive change will not come from bandage-style treatments, but by fixing a broken system as a whole.