



Intervention Symposium – Algorithmic Governance
Organised by Jeremy Crampton and Andrea Miller

Algorithmic Anxieties

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Kentucky counties with highest Medicaid rates backed Matt Bevin, who plans to cut Medicaid.

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This contribution develops the assertion that the algorithmic assemblage of algorithms, automation, roboticization and Big Data promises to make life better while simultaneously producing anxieties. This tension around socio-technologies is not new, as Frase (2015) points out. Similar concerns about the negative effects of technology and its unwanted effects on the labor force date to the agricultural and industrial revolutions. There seem to be at least two differences today. First, the anxieties are not only held by those who oppose technology or who see it as a threat, as with the Luddites or the “Captain Swing” riots of 1830 (Charlesworth 1983). Rather, those who are anxious about technology are as likely to welcome and spread more technology, often as a way of dealing with anxiety. Thus technology produces anxiety and is also seen as a way of dealing with anxiety. We desire the algorithmic assemblage even as (indeed because) it makes us anxious. This is not a contradiction if understood, second, as a political

affect. Anxiety is often dismissed as worry, emotion or irrationality, with negligible political stakes. This is not the case. Drawing on recent work by Robbins and Moore (2013) and Anderson (2016), it is possible to see anxiety as productive—of more algorithms, automation and Big Data, finally, of algorithmic governance.

A Brief History of Anxiety

Anxiety has been the focus of a number of Western philosophers, including Kierkegaard, Freud, Lacan and Heidegger, and today is the subject of 99 pages in the latest *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM V [2013]) from the American Psychiatric Association. In contrast, DSM III (1980) devoted only 15 pages to anxiety. Although the DSM pathologizes anxiety as a clinical condition in need of treatment, for Kierkegaard (2004), it is rather a condition of human existence and results from the fact that the “unhappy man is always absent from himself, never present to himself”. Kierkegaard observes that the unhappiest one is the one who lives back-to-front: what you hope for lies in your past (because you hope you were happy then) and what you remember lies in your future (because you hope it will be as good as you remember), yet both are unattainable.

These insights into the condition of anxiety are instructive for today. We are anxious because we are free to make choices; it attends our confrontation with freedom. For Heidegger, this means that anxiety is everywhere—but nowhere in particular (unlike fear). For Lacan (2014), we are never entirely present to ourselves because we find ourselves embedded in powerful socio-cultural relations of desire.

A Lacanian positive valence to anxiety was taken up by Robbins and Moore (2013), who identify an ecological anxiety disorder (EAD) as constituting our reaction to the Anthropocene and to ecological change (for example, invasive species). On the one hand, they argue, there’s anxiety about scientists being insufficiently forceful in warning about risks of human impact,

while on the other hand, scientists worry that they are being overly normative in imposing values on their studies (the very concept of “invasive” species, for example). Scientists are paralyzed because the anxiety has turned to phobia. Drawing on Lacan, they argue that if these anxieties (which are actually to do with the political outcomes that scientists desire in their view) were faced, then anxiety could be a useful experience—especially in opening up space to think critically about objects of study. As it is, scientists currently have a tendency to let phobias divert them from things that they can do something about, or into circular and unproductive debates. Anxieties turn into disabling phobias when people do not face up to the truth of their political desires, values and affects.

For Anderson (2016), politics cannot be encompassed by “signifying-subjectifying” processes, that is, representationally. Rather, we also need to acknowledge the work of “thinking-feeling” in forming political actions and beliefs. As we know from experiments since at least the 1970s, how people think or feel about an issue is not always susceptible to facts. While machine learning gets better with larger datasets (Neil Lawrence [2016a], Professor of Machine Learning at Sheffield, compares data to coal—one needs a lot to make it worthwhile), the same is not true of people. We dig in and exhibit confirmation bias, and we seem unaware of how little we know (especially if we do know little—the so-called Dunning-Kruger effect; see Kruger and Dunning 1999). We need not understand this as an irrationality or ideology but rather as an affect–anxiety. As Ahmed (2004) reminds us, affect is circulatory, not a question only of the individual subject.

Anxious Algorithms

How can we avoid turning anxieties into unproductive phobias? This question allows us to see how there might be a positive place for anxiety politically and guide better analyses of anxiety around automation and algorithmic governance. Understanding anxiety as at play rather than

ideology. Return to the headline above, based on a story about Kentucky’s new governor who had campaigned against expansion of Medicaid and Obamacare, and implying those who “ought” to be voting Democrat were instead electing Republicans. More recently, similar narratives have been circulated to explain phenomena as diverse as the popularity of Donald Trump (poor whites voting for a billionaire) and the success of “Brexiters” in the UK (British voters “willfully” trying to exert more self-control despite media warnings of negative consequences). As with Kentucky, areas of the UK receiving proportionally higher aid from Europe also voted more enthusiastically for Brexit.

Algorithms are sites of anxiety because they embed desire. To see this, consider a standard definition of algorithm as “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations” (Gillespie 2014:167). The anxiety here is the anxiety of algorithmic governance—how we desire to govern with algorithms. Paraphrasing Foucault, an algorithm is “calculation + desire = conduct of conduct”.

One anxiety with algorithms is that they won’t work because we don’t have enough data. Data after all is more powerful in the presence of other data, and machines learn better on bigger datasets (Lawrence 2016b; Palmer 2017). Here I am less concerned about some of the news stories about algorithms gone wrong, such as Facebook’s “Trending Topics” algorithm that got caught up in fake news, or that researchers are split on the benefits/costs of algorithms (Rainie and Anderson 2017). Rather, the drive for data leads to the “collect it all” mentality (Crampton 2014) of exploiting the developments in surveillance and data capacity (the “v” for volume of Big Data). At the same time, there is anxiety around having too much, of not “finding the needle in the haystack”. We oscillate between having too much data and yet desiring more.

There are also anxieties around the push for code to practice governance. A recent Pew Research Center report (Rainie and Anderson 2017) identified four areas of concern about algorithmic governance:

1. People are left out of the loop;
2. Biases are embedded in algorithms;
3. Algorithms deepen divides (e.g. see Angwin et al. 2016);
4. Algorithms will disrupt the workplace and cause unemployment through automation and robotization.

What makes our current situation so contradictory, then, is that humans are abrogating decision-making to algorithms, code, machine learning, and the Internet of Things (a fear of yielding up too much), while at the same time advances in those areas promise the Smart City, increased crop yields, self-driving vehicles, and a flood of consumer goods (a fear of never having enough). We are faced with “Schrödinger’s algorithm”, simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous.

Following Lacan, we can understand that data is symbolic and representational but that it can never finally fully represent. Data is not fully present or known to itself and data chases more data in a futile attempt to represent more fully. As we saw with the definition of the algorithm, there is an expression of desire, and the fact that this desire can never be satisfied is what gives rise to anxiety. Anxiety is the falling short of desire (e.g. the desire through data accumulation), but what it produces is more algorithms and data. For Lacan, anxiety is not about lack but what he calls “lack of a lack”, an overwhelming and suffocating presence; too much data.

What this should tell us is that data and code are never going to satisfy our desires. The continual claim that Big Data and algorithms, if they can just be extended into this or that sphere, will solve our problems, is a wild goose chase. But instead of this being despairing, if we can “stay with the trouble” of anxiety (Haraway 2016), to work through the affective politics of algorithms in particular places, we might come to terms with our political moment.

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