Intersectionality and Algorithmic Discrimination: Intersecting Disciplinary Perspectives
18-22 December 2017 @ Snellius

Description and aims

In the wake of the *Big Data* hype, a need has arisen for more realistic and critical analyses of the opportunities and risks associated with the widespread use of data analytics within society. Discrimination may emerge from the use of algorithmic systems due to historically biased data, societal biases and structural inequities, lack of knowledge about mechanisms of structural discrimination, all of which may creep into design choices when building large scale information systems. Our workshop was born out of the need for reflection on the complexity of the intersecting power systems in society, how these are encoded in decision structures and how we should deal with this in the context of algorithmic systems. While intersectionality theory offers decades of scholarship on such questions, it has so far been disconnected from the debates on algorithmic discrimination. The main aim of our workshop was to initiate an international, multidisciplinary, diverse community to resolve this disconnect.

Program, preparations and how it unfolded

We were honored to have an introduction on intersectionality theory and an extensive Q&A from Prof. Philomena Essed, whose scholarship of decades spans both the Dutch and US debates. For representation of existing discussions in algorithmic discrimination, we relied on introductions from Prof. Solon Barocas, Prof. Krishna Gummadi, Prof. Anne Lauren Hoffmann, Prof. Scott Skinner-Thompson, as well as a video presentation from Prof. Michael Kearns.

While we deliberately chose for the small scale set-up of the Snellius facility of the Lorentz Center, we were well aware of the wide interest in the topic. For this reason we organized a public lecture at the (freshly renovated!) Boerhaave museum, with danah boyd of Data & Society speaking on *Fairness and Accountability of Sociotechnical Algorithmic Systems.* This lecture was very well attended by a diverse audience.[1]

Throughout the organization phase of the workshop, a significant effort went into the curation of the content and participants of the group. The organizing committee collectively read and discussed texts to grasp the disconnect we intended to address. Based on this, we agreed that bridging across existing networks of researchers would not be enough; we wanted the conversation to be shaped by scholars who actively engage with marginalized and/or vulnerable communities, and weave that engagement into their academic practice. We balanced the participation to ensure that the experience and knowledge of these scholars would be equally represented and well received in the room.

While curating the workshop, we were also aware of the challenges put forward by differences in disciplinary power – manifest in funding, scientific standing and societal interest – methodologies, vocabularies, cultures, and personal experiences our participants would bring in relation to the

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[1] For example, the lecture was reported on by the *Koninklijke vereniging van archivarissen in Nederland (KVAN):* Vera Weterings, "Toekomstmuziek of harde werkelijkheid? het hoofdpijndossier dat Big Data met zich meebrengt." *Archievenblad* no.1, 2018, pp.26-29.

subject matter. To address this, we chose working methods to create a space of openness and safety for everyone to feel welcome to lay their perspectives on the table.

Our methods included a set of principles for interaction, which we invited participants to commit to at the start of the week; assignment of a *translator* to each session that would mediate cross-disciplinary discussions; and, a reader with excerpts from seminal papers on the workshop theme from different disciplinary perspectives that was distributed in advance. The central of role of translation became particularly clear in the session where Solon Barocas and Krishna Gummadi supported us in collectively stepping through Michael Kearns' video-presentation of his paper to collectively discuss the exact meaning of the results and provide background to them from all different disciplinary perspectives present in the room.

All in all, our participants were extremely engaged and invested in creating a mutual understanding of the issues at hand, recognizing significant differences among us, and finding constructive and coordinated ways for going forward. The interactions were intense and produced a lot of material and ideas for future research and collaborations. In anticipation of this intensity, we organized infrastructure to document all sessions by collaboratively taking notes in a shared etherpad-environment. For this we used the stand-alone infrastructure developed by the Belgian art collective Constant VZW.

Outcomes and take-aways
While the rich experience of the workshop requires time to fully digest, participants articulated both personal and shared initial take-aways in the closing session, such as: never overlook historical context when considering (algorithmic) discrimination; equal distribution of errors or unwanted consequences does not guarantee justice; there may be domains or cases where it is better not to deploy algorithmic systems at all; intersectional discrimination cannot be articulated as a function; and as a meta-insight on interdisciplinary work: concepts act as different methodological tools in different fields.

The processing of the event documentation is a first step towards the planned writing of a research strategy document. In the first couple of months after the workshop, the participants have already reconnected at several international venues (FAT* at NYU, CPDP in Brussels), and are working on proposals for follow-up workshops and joint papers based on the workshop discussions.

Other comments, suggestions and/or criticism for the Lorentz Center, the scientific advisory boards and/or future organizers.
The mission statement of the Lorentz Center states that it "is committed to stimulate diversity in all aspects." Our workshop brought together scholars from well-funded and currently prominent fields (e.g., computer science, technology policy) with scholars whose work is key to the topics at hand, but whose fields are underfunded even within first-world universities (e.g., humanities, intersectional studies). This discrepancy is likely to intensify as more public and private funding flows to STEM fields. We would encourage the Lorentz Center to explicitly consider diversity along such axes as well in their offering of financial support.

Organizers

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