



Selected Papers of #AoIR2021:  
The 22nd Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Virtual Event / 13-16 Oct 2021

## **CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AS A PRACTICE OF RESISTANCE TO ALGORITHMS**

Riccardo Pronzato  
IULM University, Italy

### **Introduction**

Today using the Internet implies primarily using digital platforms (Gillespie, 2015). Specifically, our social structures and personal lives are increasingly dependent on digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018), with algorithmic media playing a systemic role in the construction of social reality (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). In this digitally saturated world, everyday activities take increasingly place in and through the affordances of algorithmic media, and social life is increasingly co-constructed and shaped by them (Bucher, 2018).

This has become an even more central issue since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis as millions of people were obliged to live confined in their homes, depending on their online devices to communicate with others and make sense of the world (Risi et al., 2020a).

### **The role of users**

In this scenario, users have often been depicted as powerless subjects, that cannot protect themselves from opaque and exploitative commercial practices, or the cultural biases embedded in the code and the following reiteration of pre-existing social discriminations through data (O'Neil, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). Furthermore, individuals seem to have internalized their condition of exploited users, within a hegemonic discursive regime based on narratives of dependency, powerlessness, inevitability and trajectorism. As highlighted by Markham (2021), it appears complicated for individuals to imagine “futures in ways that do not reproduce current ideological trends or cede control and power to external, mostly corporate, stakeholders” (p. 384).

Thus far, a few empirical studies have focused on how individuals make sense of algorithms in their everyday life, how they embed algorithmic outputs in daily activities and exert their agency while using the Internet (e.g. Bucher, 2018; Siles et al., 2019). Furthermore, little is known regarding how researchers can actively elicit critical

Suggested Citation (APA): Pronzato, R. (2021, October). *Critical pedagogy as a practice of resistance to algorithms*. Paper presented at AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

reflections regarding structures of datafication and surveillance, and help individuals increase their awareness.

Drawing on 40 auto-ethnographic diaries, this paper argues that a critical pedagogical approach can be a valuable methodological framework to investigate how people perceive and make sense of algorithmic media, as well as to increase people's awareness regarding algorithmic surveillance.

### **Critical pedagogy and auto-ethnographic diaries**

The critical pedagogy approach has been developed by Annette Markham (2019), inspired by Antonio Gramsci, Paolo Freire and feminist movements in the 1960s among the others. The main idea is to make individuals auto-ethnographers of their own lives and to "help people find modes and means of critically examining and understanding the contexts within which they are drawn into a neoliberal position through the seemingly innocuous practices of such things as making and sharing images, clicking on links, turning on the smartphone's GPS" (Markham, 2019, p. 759).

An effective manner to apply this approach and engage participants is the use of auto-ethnographic diaries (Risi et al., 2020b). Diaries have a long record of enhancing self-reflexivity through writing (Richardson, 1994; Couldry et al., 2007), hence, they can allow individuals to construct embodied sensibilities toward their daily, "taken for granted" online activities and transform individual experiences into a critical understanding of how algorithmic media ubiquitously intervene in everyday life (Markham, 2020).

Within this framework, the benefit of inviting individuals to keep an auto-ethnographic diary is twofold. First, it allows to gather rich first-hand qualitative data regarding how individuals relate with algorithmic media, which is crucial to better understand not only how algorithms are perceived, but also how they are enacted in social reality, i.e. brought into being by user practices. Indeed, algorithms are not fixed entities, but rather malleable objects that materialize in and through human practices, perceptions and interpretations (Seaver, 2017), hence, they can be studied "as the manifold consequences of a variety of human practices" (p. 4), which make algorithms emerge by bringing them into being. Second, auto-ethnographic diaries can empower people by making them critically examine the pervasive processes of datafication and surveillance to which they are exposed, thereby increasing their awareness and data literacy, and fostering a proactive process that can be the starting point for practices of resistance and independence from commercial exploitation through algorithms.

### **Conclusion**

Given the striking role of platform affordances in everyday sensemaking processes and in how individuals imagine themselves, their lives and different digital futures, I argue that a critical pedagogy approach can be a way to redistribute social value to the public while doing social research. Auto-ethnographic diaries can be a research tool through which researchers collect qualitative in-depth material regarding the open-ended set of

practices related to algorithmic media, but also a pedagogical tool that allows individuals to thoroughly reflect on their online activities.

Certainly, some limitations need to be noted regarding the proposed method, such as the use of a non-probability sample, the impossibility to make statistical generalizations and the potential issues of social desirability typically associated with self-reporting techniques. Nevertheless, as Antonio Gramsci claimed that workers in the 1930s had to teach “themselves to be conscious of the conditions of structural oppression that hide beneath the surface of everyday institutional practices, a condition he labelled hegemony, or control through consent” (Markham, 2019, p 755), today individuals may attempt to challenge the preexisting power relationships embedded in algorithms, which exert a new form of structural oppression. Auto-ethnographic diaries based on a critical pedagogy approach can be a starting point to do so, thereby fostering awareness, resistance to - and independence from surveillance, datafication, algorithms, and the exploitation of human experience through data.

## References

Bucher, T. (2018). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Couldry, N., Livingstone, S. & Markham, T. (2007) *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gillespie, T. (2015). Platforms intervene. *Social Media + Society*, 1(1), 1-2.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580479>

Markham, A. N. (2019). Critical pedagogy as a response to datafication. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(8), 754-760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418809470>

Markham, A. (2021). The limits of the imaginary: Challenges to intervening in future speculations of memory, data, and algorithms. *New media & society*, 23(2), 382-405.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820929322>

O’Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. New York, NY: Crown.

Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A Method of Inquiry?. In N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks, Sage.

Risi, E., Pronzato, R., & Di Fraia, G. (2020a). Living and Working Confined at Home: Boundaries and Platforms during the Lockdown. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 5(2), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/9253>

Risi, E., Bonini, T. & Pronzato, R. (2020b). Algorithmic media in everyday life. An experience with auto-ethnographic student diaries. *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 3, 407-422. [10.3240/99552](https://doi.org/10.3240/99552)

Seaver, N. (2017). Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems. *Big Data & Society*, 4(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717738104>

Siles, I., Espinoza-Rojas, J., Naranjo, A., & Tristán, M. F. (2019). The mutual domestication of users and algorithmic recommendations on Netflix. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 12(4), 499-518. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz025>

Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & De Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London, UK: Profile Books.