

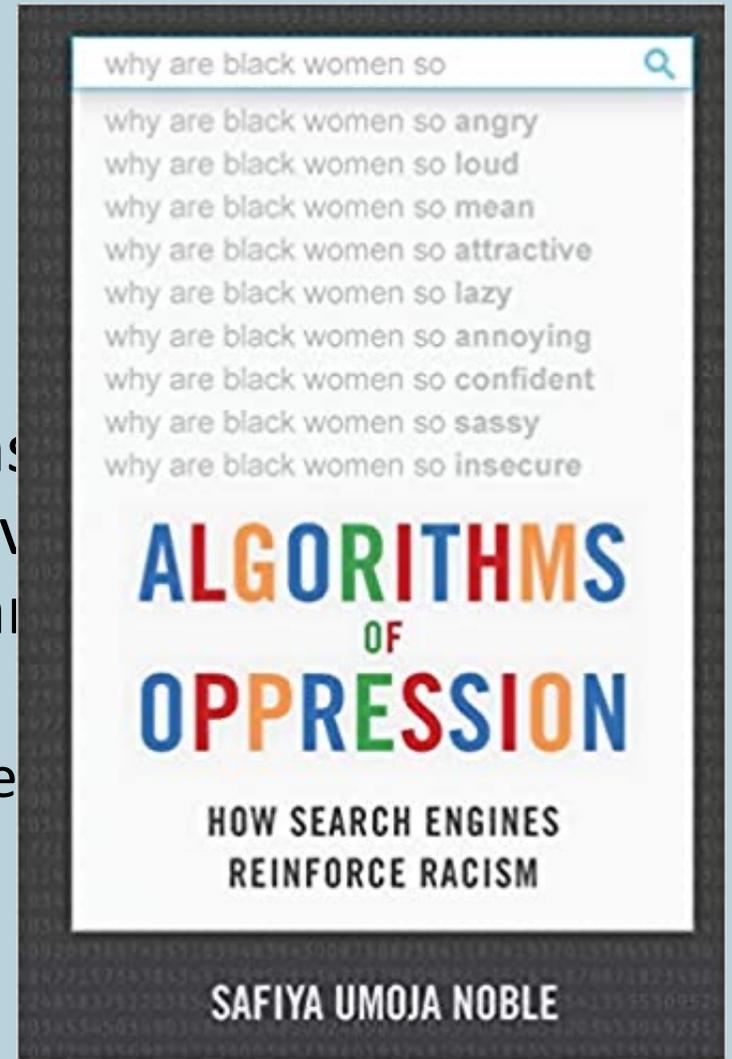
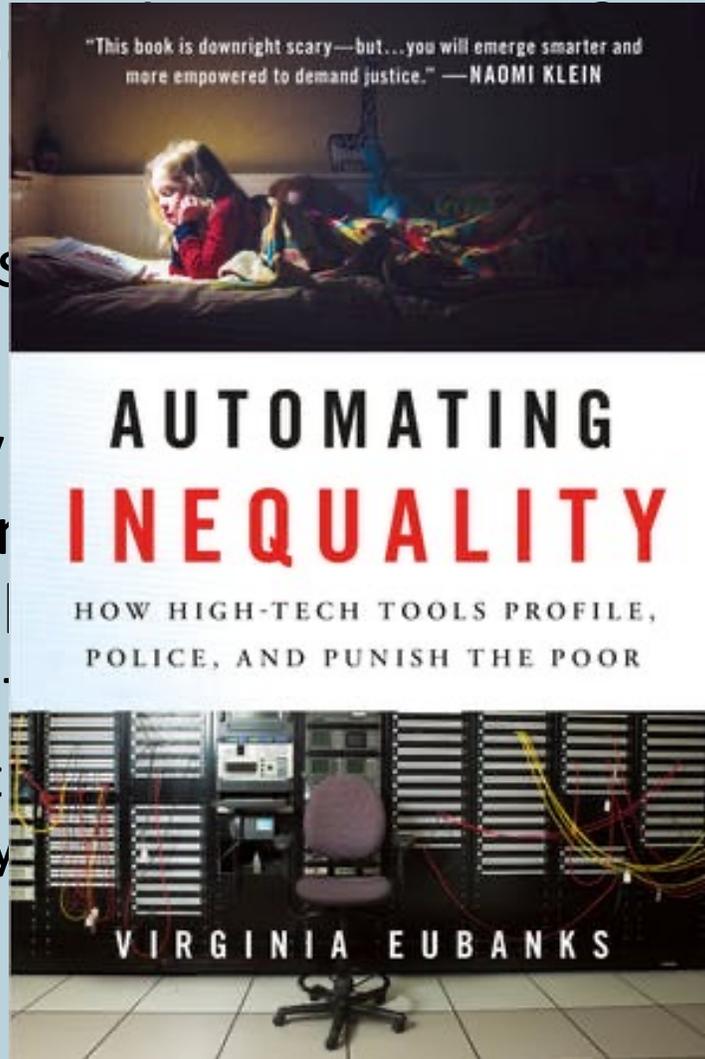
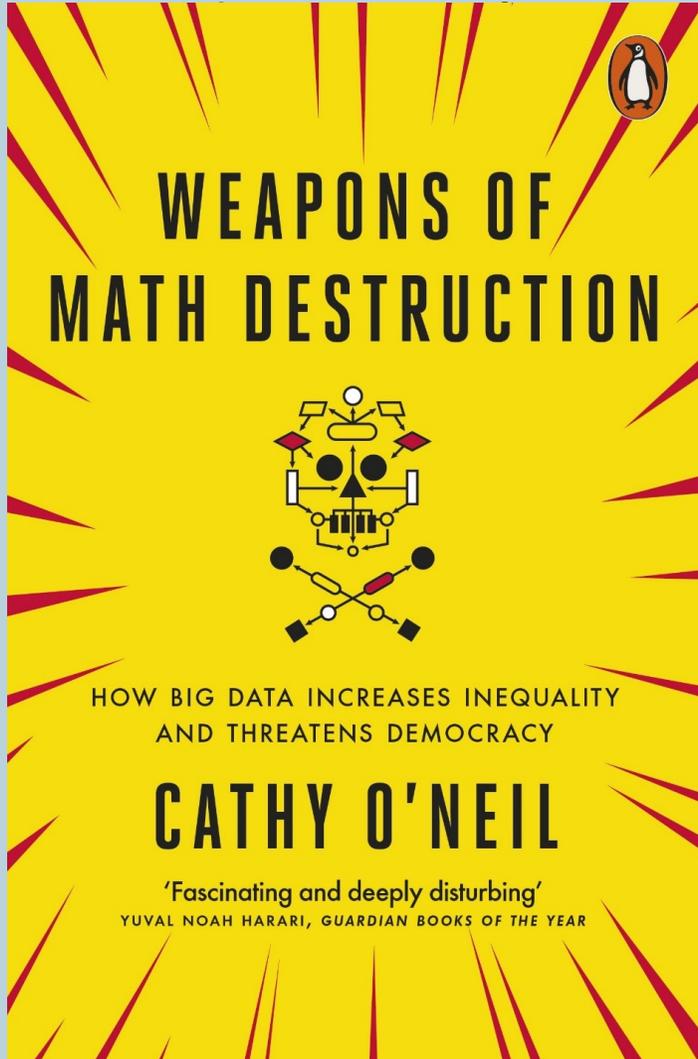
THE SOCIAL POWER OF AI

How algorithmic imaginaries shape humanitarian communication on social media

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Studying the social power of AI

- Most analytical approaches in SoSci (reverse engineering, ethnographies of coding teams etc.) focus on the algorithms themselves
- BUT! Meaning is not just encoded onto algorithms that users then decode or make sense of
- Because user action gets fed back into the encoding process, consumption is always already part of the production and vice versa
- By focusing on the algorithms themselves we miss these crucial socio-cultural dimensions of algorithmic production

What are algorithmic imaginaries?

= Collective ways of thinking about what social media algorithms are and what they do (Bucher 2018)

- What matters is not whether these beliefs are accurate or not because, when enacted, they become part of the truth
- Algorithmic imaginaries are thus *productive*: What people think about algorithms influence how they use social media media in their everyday
- BUT! Algorithmic imaginaries also work beyond the interpretative realm
 - I.e. they are recursively modelled back into algorithmic systems and thus come to influence algorithmic decisions.

How did I study algorithmic imaginaries?

- My approach draws on digital ethnography and critical software studies
- **Primary data:** semi-structured interviews with social media editors across humanitarian organisations, UNHCR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in DK
 - But why SoMe editors?
- **Analytical focus:** the experiences and perceptions of respondents tasked with crafting and publishing humanitarian messages on algorithmically governed social media platforms (primarily Facebook)

What did I find?

There is a dominant, collective belief that algorithms

- are *meritocratic* (they give users what they want)
 - but, at the same time, they are seen as having authority
- are *dynamic* (and thus unpredictable)
 - but, at the same time, knowing what they want is immensely valuable

What did I find?

These algorithmic imaginaries in turn inform

- a turn to data analytics
 - To “know” what algorithms want humanitarian organisations must continuously experiment and adapt
- a techno-communitarian attitude
 - What the algorithm wants (according to the data) are images and stories that Western publics can easily relate to

“Algorithms aren’t gods. We need not believe that they rule the world in order to admit that they influence it, sometimes profoundly. Let’s bring algorithms down to earth again. Let’s keep the computer around without fetishizing it, without bowing down to it or shrugging away its inevitable power over us.”

- Ian Bogost