

Bodies Bound by Barriers: A Digital Perspective.

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About the Author | Jeanine Ros is a sociologist and designer based in Rotterdam. She focuses on reproductive justice and social inequalities in healthcare, investigating the effect of digitalisation on society and how it affects marginalised groups. Her work, rooted in the social sciences, is expressed in various media and calls for reflection and action for a more just (digital) future.

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Introduction

Brush your hand along a bush of roses and you will likely feel a pinch. The stem of the rose has thorns, intentionally placed on its body as a form of protection from being picked, nicked, or flicked, creating a barrier to keep the flower intact. The taller plant above the rose has created a barrier too, this one made from a barricade of stems which cast a shadow on the plants below it to compete for survival. When thinking of the thorns on the rose's stem, or the ambitious plant reaching for a purer light source, I feel no emotions of anger, resentment, or judgement toward them for their fight for self-protection. If anything, I find myself fascinated by these barriers in the natural, "wild" environment. They've evolved over millions of years for protection, and although their self-protection jeopardises other plants, I don't believe they act out of malice toward their neighbours. It is a completely different feeling that arises when observing the barriers of the less natural, human-made variety.

In our constructed world, formations of barriers, physical and mental, can obstruct the mobility of people and the autonomy of human thought. These barriers go beyond matters of survival, instead serving as a

form of policing to maintain positions of power. Think, for example, of militarised border fences controlling the movement of people, or socio-economic barriers controlling their welfare. In these contexts, I experience greater emotions of anger, resentment, and judgement as these constructions are often exclusionary and continue to orchestrate conflict. One particularly powerful barrier hidden in our world has emerged as a profound challenge in the modern age. Introducing, the digital algorithm.

Algorithmic barriers pierce deeper than the thorn of any humble flower and stand firmer than an armed guard. Digital barriers, as this article will explore, pose a profound threat to the freedom of information access and influence the ability to allow its users to be independent of governmental dictation. I will demystify the use of algorithms to illustrate their strength as a barrier to safety and integrity online. The specific example I will use as a case study has been made possible by my work experience at Women on Web, a feminist non-profit organisation providing online abortion access globally, that has offered me valuable insights into the workings of algorithms on Meta and Google when accessing reproductive healthcare online.

Algorithms & the Internet

Highly saturated 90s advertisements for the internet claimed that the new utopia of endless information and safe web surfing was among us. While this rhetoric persists, online barriers have grown to mirror offline politics. These barriers in question are unseen to the naked eye, constructed by the well-trained, black-tie-suited eye consisting of patterns and codes that filter online information. Algorithms, widely used on the internet, are intangible and often impossible to see. With 'nothing to hide,' people tend not to object to the algorithms employed by Big Tech platforms like Google or Meta.

Algorithms, protected by a public trust in mathematics, are often perceived as *just* sets of coded instructions that provide internet users with a unique and personally tailored experience (Crawford, 2022). While algorithms do personalise online experiences, their operations remain as enigmatic as the workings of magic. Similar to a magician's illusion, the crucial aspect of their effectiveness lies in keeping the audience unaware of how the trick is orchestrated. Despite Google and Meta's efforts to provide purported transparency through dedicated web pages, there are discrepancies in how algorithms are used on these platforms.

Extending the metaphor of 'magic', the magicians at work are the computer scientists who determine what information on which platform is available to be seen, and what is to be censored, deleted, or banned - a process I will refer to as Platform Censorship (York, 2022). In this way, algorithms become the magic wand when manipulating the information that reaches its users in pursuit of desired

outcomes (Cobbe, 2020). The global concentration of these magicians reside in the 4800-kilometre squared region of Silicon Valley, California - with an influence that is felt worldwide. Most significantly, the influence of US politics and mentalities are coerced through their magic spells.

The capitalist values of Silicon Valley extend deep into the minds of these scientists at work, a phenomenon Jillian York discusses in her book *Silicon Values* (2022). This book unpacks that 'Silicon Values' are the implicit biases, assumptions, and dominant ideologies that permeate a form of governmentality that reflects the perspectives and interests of the predominantly male, Western, and profit-driven tech industry (ibid).

Digital Barriers to Bodily Autonomy

A recent milestone development in abortion related politics was in 2022, when *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision protecting the right to abortion, was overturned in the United States of America (Supreme Court Case: *Dobbs v. Jackson*, 2023). This event has marked a pivotal moment in history, representing a right-wing, "anti-choice" view on abortion access in the US (ibid). The knock-on effects have been felt across the country, with abortion laws fitting more conservative regulation in Mid-West states like Texas.

Urgency of Abortion Politics & Change

Issues around abortion are urgent. Pregnancies continue to develop unless aborted. Abortions cannot be done after the 24-week mark, medical abortions until the 12th. In an era where diligent condom use is an issue among sexually active people and rape culture is still rampant, there's a huge window to conceive without meaning to. With high chances for

unwanted pregnancies, we can't afford to lose access to abortions. The barriers a person faces to access safe, timely, affordable and respectful abortion care have been recognised by the WHO as a critical public health and human rights issue since 2021. When reliable and credible abortion care providers like Women on Web are censored and suppressed by content platforms like Meta and Google, a barrier is created and a violation of human rights is perpetuated. This has been seen repeatedly, reported by Women on Web, where the algorithms employed by Google and Meta block their social media accounts, block their websites, suppress their online posts, and remove their ads (Digital Rights Issue, 2022).

Surveillance Governmentality

Circling back, an integral part of Silicon Valley's success in algorithm manufacture is the concept of Surveillance Capitalism, a useful concept to understand when examining the tractability of bodies when they are subject to algorithms (Zuboff, 2021). Zuboff defines Surveillance Capitalism eight times in her book, the most relevant for this case being that Surveillance Capitalism is "the origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy" (2021, p.8). Adding to this, as defined in Silicon Values, 'Surveillance Capitalism encompasses a system that has enabled a milieu where companies, not governments, decide how people express themselves' (York, 2022).

Reproductive Surveillance

Applying this Surveillance Capitalism lens to reproductive healthcare,

the conjunctive term 'Reproductive Surveillance' has been defined to raise important questions about the privacy, access to information, and control of user data, specific to accessing information about reproductive healthcare online (Ford et al., 2021).

Reproductive Surveillance involves looking at how algorithms, the behind-the-scenes digital magicians, work as a governmental force referred to as Algorithmic Governmentality (Cobbe, 2020, p. 745). This is done by filtering the information users see online through platform censorship. This means that algorithms are programmed to decide what is deemed appropriate to show internet users based on their specific criteria. Gatekeeping information like this has a profound impact, especially when it comes to information about abortion access. This censorship controls access to information on abortion care through content moderation on online platforms to suppress or control expressions that contradict or challenge values or belief systems in Silicon Valley (York, 2022. p. xi). In a nutshell, Reproductive Surveillance is all about how Big Tech is shaping the information users see when it comes to reproductive healthcare. When analysed, this shaping of the digital landscape feeds an ethical conflict - who has the right over their body and what they do with it. Do I decide, or does Big Tech?

Applying this concept, I explored how the online abortion service, Women on Web, experiences Reproductive Surveillance as they face platform censorship from Meta and Google. It became clear that there is no reliable or consistent answer when understanding

the blocking of their social media platforms, ads, or their website. The automated answer often received by Women on Web when fighting digital suppression is that their content 'exceeds community guidelines'. The question marks rose above my head when reading exactly what their community guidelines entail, and seeing that Women on Web's content does not exceed them. What does become clear is online biases and the specific examples of algorithmic suppression of information about abortion mirroring the policy change of overturning Roe v Wade (Supreme Court Case: Dobbs v. Jackson, 2023). What was interesting to note was that many anti-choice lobbyists did not experience the same censorship upon analysis of secondary sources, Center for Countering Digital Hate in 2021. Their report 'Endangering Women for Profit' states that anti-choice organisations use Meta's platforms to promote abortion pill "reversal" (APR), which involves flooding the body with progesterone to counteract the effects of the abortion pill. This service is offered by groups like Live Action, a US-based nonprofit associated with religious factions advocating against abortion. Unlike the FDA-approved abortion pill, APR lacks FDA approval and poses health risks. Despite this, Meta received payments for circulating APR ads on Facebook, directing users to websites promoting its effectiveness. Alarming, these ads were shown to minors aged 13-17 over 700,000 times, contradicting Meta's policies on inappropriate content for minors (CCDH, 2021). When analysing the community guidelines and the posts that get taken down versus what is left online - the question arises of what the

algorithms deem inappropriate, a right-wing preference made clear by this example.

Breaking Down the Digital Barriers

The fact that Algorithmic Governmentality is a barrier to bodily autonomy highlights the need to actively critique the development and implementation of algorithms on platforms such as Google and Meta where access to abortion care is made harder, or impossible. Internet users may generally think of Google and Meta as free, safe platforms which clearly must be questioned as we see anti-feminist repercussions of 'Silicon Values' in the digital realm. It is crucial to recognise and challenge the ways in which Algorithmic Governmentality operates in this e-space, and to prioritise the needs and experiences of internet users seeking reliable online healthcare support.

This could be done by ensuring transparent data practice through stricter legislation and regulation of programming algorithms, ensuring representative and reliable training data for algorithms, and streamlining content moderation with policies that reflect the values disclosed on their platforms.

Conclusion

American Poet, Audre Lorde, beautifully wrote that the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" - a powerful metaphor in the context of algorithms in Silicon Valley (York, 2022, p.211). In this context, the computer science magicians of Silicon Valley who profit from their capitalist ways of work are unlikely to willingly relinquish control or provide complete transparency regarding their technological advancements. We need to pay more attention to how

Algorithmic Governmentality works in various fields and challenge it, so we can centralise the needs and experiences of the marginalised communities who suffer from internet policing the most greatly.

Not seeing or realising the barriers imposed by algorithms online is like running your hand along a rose stem, feeling no pinch from the thorns, but bleeding anyway. These online barriers exist widely, but because online censorship operates invisibly, users are unaware of the information they're not being shown, and it is this lack of visibility that makes it easier for no action to be taken. Given that algorithms may not be commonly known or understood by the general public, we can say that most internet users are unaware that what they see, or cannot see, is being monitored. It is therefore important that activists and influential people who have this awareness of digital literacy help others connect the dots and advocate for their rights concerning bodily autonomy and reproductive justice.

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