

Optimizing Repression: Algorithmic Surveillance and the Neoliberal Subject in Platform Economy

Cierra Bettens

Algorithms have become an inescapable facet of reality. From the music and films that are recommended through streaming services to the quickest rush hour route via Google maps, their presence is a subtle, but persistent feature of daily life. In popular culture, self-help literature increasingly uses language and metaphors based on algorithms and automation—Brian Christian and Tom Griffith’s *Algorithms to Live By*, to name one example. At the same time, algorithms are increasingly being integrated into workplaces across various sectors. The emergence of the platform economy—where digital employers like Uber mediate relationships between workers and consumers (Woodcock 6)—has increasingly subjected workers to the pervasive surveillance of algorithms. As a result, workers are under close surveillance while being increasingly disconnected from their co-workers—most of whom they’ll never meet.

This essay will examine how algorithms have indelibly altered the labour force both within and outside of the platform economy. Primarily, it will argue that algorithms constitute both growing surveillance in the workplace and a metaphor for the neoliberal idealization of the worker. First, it examines the relationship between capitalism, surveillance and labour, and how algorithms have factored into the equation. Second, it uses Foucault’s theories of neoliberal governmentality to discuss the creation of the neoliberal subject (*homo oeconomicus*) and how the algorithm can be viewed

as a metaphor for it. It concludes with remarks on the implications of algorithmic surveillance and the platform economy for the labour movement, as well as importance of understanding how workplace technologies become repressive under capitalism. Above all, it underscores the need to not only understand how algorithms function, but how they help reproduce a labour force based on neoliberal principles and governance.

Algorithms, capitalism and surveillance

In simplest terms, algorithms can be defined as “any well-defined computational procedure that takes some value, or set of values, as *output* in a finite amount of time” (Cormen et al. 5). As Burton et al. write in *Algorithmic Authenticity*, algorithms “are the means by which computers *do things*” (19).

Today, the introduction of algorithms into everyday life has indelibly altered the way we interact with each other and our environments. In *Radical Technologies*, Greenfield describes the mass integration of algorithms, machine learning, and other technologies as “the posthuman everyday” (174). In the posthuman everyday, daily life is not only shaped by human needs, but also by the systems that facilitate it (Greenfield 174). Algorithms are a critical feature of this—they perform a myriad of actions, from the music that is recommended to users through their streaming services, to pricing commodities and even matches on dating apps (Greenfield 198). While the inner workings of algorithms are complex, the general way they are trained to operate is more simplistic. Algorithms are programmed through machine learning, where they are fed large sets of data and learn to distinguish “good” and “unacceptable” performance over time (Greenfield 200).

In a capitalist economy, algorithms serve to help facilitate production more efficiently and drive up profits. The rise of “automated neoliberalism” works in tandem with algorithms, negating the need

for human intermediaries in market exchanges (Birch 18). As Birch describes, “market supply and demand are automated by platforms, meaning that competition, especially of the idealised and naturalised ‘perfect’ kind in neoliberal imaginaries, is also automated—and thereby eroded or erased” (20). In this way, algorithms have merely accelerated and upheld, rather than challenged neoliberalism.

In the platform economy, algorithms are increasingly the faceless entity that governs and disciplines workers. In *Uberland*, Alex Rosenblat synthesizes primary accounts from Uber drivers with insights into how algorithms are used to track personal data and take advantage of both drivers and riders. Despite the lack of a human persona, Uber drivers are closely monitored and precariously employed. As Rosenblat explains, the “rating system at Uber effectively makes management omnipresent, because it subtly shifts how drivers behave on the job” (149). Thus, algorithms have emerged as a tool for cost-effective surveillance. In the absence of a salaried manager, the workplace algorithm is both pervasive and subtle; the workers are aware of its presence but unable to communicate with it or fully understand how it interprets their performance.

Neoliberal governmentality and the entrepreneur of the (quantified) self

To develop an idea of how the algorithm could function as a metaphor for the idealized worker, it is necessary to examine the economic, social and political structures that inform how and what it is programmed to do. A useful framework to understand this is through Foucault’s theory of neoliberal governmentality. Neoliberal governmentality can be understood as a political project that reproduces neoliberal ideology not only through institutions or collective bodies, but how individuals govern themselves (Lemke 60). As an economic system, neoliberalism is understood as a project founded on free market principles, emphasizing

“(d)eregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state” (Harvey 3). However, reducing it to an economic system fails to capture its political, social and ideological implications. A governmentality approach thus captures the multidimensional ways neoliberalism functions.

In a myriad of ways, neoliberalism taints the way we view and interact with technology and how this in turn informs our subjectivity. One way to think of the relationship between neoliberalism and governmentality is through technologies of the self (Lemke). Under neoliberalism, individuals are incentivized to see every setback and hardship as personal, rather than societal issues. Industries of “self-care” and “self-esteem” define how we govern ourselves the “correct” way, i.e., in line with neoliberal governmentality (Lemke 60). As a result, the burden of social woes like “illness, unemployment and poverty” is placed on the individual to resolve and consistently invest in their human capital and profitability (Lemke 59). In turn, this self-governmentality allows for the seamless reproduction of the neoliberal economic system that is premised on deregulation, austerity and drastic cuts to social services.

From neoliberal governmentality emerges the neoliberal subject or *homo oeconomicus*. Foucault’s notion of *homo oeconomicus* describes the figure of “a subject of governmental rationality serving as a grid of intelligibility between the government and the governed” (Dilts 131). In other words, the primary function of *homo oeconomicus* is to govern himself to rationally act in accordance with the governance system—in this case, neoliberalism—to maximize his (self) interest (Dilts 131). From the *homo oeconomicus*, Foucault formulates a new, more precise iteration: the entrepreneur of the self. The entrepreneur of the self is a representation of the neoliberal subject who is encouraged to be the intrinsic source of their capital and take on the risks that come with that (Dilts 131). In many ways, platform economy workers are encouraged to become

entrepreneurs of the self. With many classified as independent contractors rather than employees, health benefits, job security and other benefits workers would otherwise be granted, are absent. Instead, workers are sold a neoliberal notion of freedom, where they can set their own hours, have the illusion of being their own boss and seemingly make as much or as little money as they desire. This, however, comes at the cost of viewing any work-related issue as an individual, rather than a systemic one.

Further, the metaphor of the algorithm bears many similarities to *homo oeconomicus*. As Foucault describes in *Birth of Biopolitics*, the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* describes an individual who “appears precisely as someone manageable...responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment” and above all, is “eminently governable” (Foucault 270-1 as cited in Dilts 131-2). In other words, the *homo oeconomicus* govern themselves like an algorithm; at the cost of attending to human needs, everything is approached in the name of efficiency, accuracy and profitability. The framing of workers as entrepreneurs of the self is also reflected in the shift in the economic structures of neoliberalism. Workers are sold a false notion of becoming “one’s own boss” and in turn, they are expected to take on “the risks and the costs now externalized onto the rest of society by business interests and austerity governments” (Flisfeder 563). Thus, it’s crucial to understand that the formation of the entrepreneurial subject is not in isolation from the economic system it operates in—rather, it is in a symbiotic relationship with neoliberalism.

A more recent articulation of the entrepreneur of the self, particularly in the platform economy, is the Quantified Self. Originating in mid-2000s California, the Quantified Self emerged in online and in-person chapters, where members discuss how to use the quantified tracking systems within their devices, such as sleep biometrics, to “better” themselves as more efficient human beings (Greenfield 41-42). As Greenfield describes, they “are willing to do whatever it takes

to re-engineer the body so that it gets more done in less time,” and “transform themselves into all-but-fungible production units, valued only in terms of what they offer the economy” (42). Today, the idea of the Quantified Self has permeated beyond Silicon Valley software engineers and into popular and workplace culture. Under the surveillance of algorithms, workers have little choice but to become Quantified Selves. Uber drivers, for example, are subjected to a constant stream of quantitative tracking, which creates a feeling of surveillance despite the absence of a human manager (Rosenblat 142). A driver’s job security is dictated by their ability to maintain a consistent, positive rating above a certain star threshold. If they fall below a certain rating—generally below 4.6/5 stars, or a ride acceptance rate below 80-90%—they could lose their source of livelihood. One driver’s testimony in *Uberland* revealed that kicking out an intoxicated and aggressive passenger yielded a one-star rating that tanked a near-perfect 4.97 rating to a 4.7 (Rosenblat 145). When drivers attempt to challenge complaints, they are forced to reckon with even deeper levels of algorithmic governance—most of Uber’s communications are delivered through automated replies (Rosenblat 143). Such examples reveal the deeply repressive consequences of faulty algorithmic governance in the name of user convenience and cost-effectiveness. In absence of human nuance and empathy, workers are left in a more precarious position. This, however, does not make the platform economy less profitable—if anything, it makes it more so.

Another example of the Quantified Self in the workplace can be found in Amazon warehouses. Forced to meet harsh, unrealistic quotas, warehouse workers are reduced to “meat algorithms” who are valued “only for their ability to move and follow orders” (Bridle 98). Further, Amazon warehouses are organized not according to human logic, but by algorithmic efficiency. Rather than being organized by category, Amazon warehouses are virtually random, with algorithms guiding workers to the location (Baraniuk). In some warehouses, a handheld clock counts down the seconds they’re

allotted to retrieve the next item and meet their productivity quota (Baraniuk). This organizational model is one of many ways that the algorithmic models not only take precedence over human lives, but acts as the idealized, yet deeply unrealistic model that workers are expected to uphold. While humans need bathroom breaks and sick leave, algorithms require no such thing. By expecting workers to think and act like algorithms, they are stripped of their humanity.

Again, the joint relationship between algorithmic surveillance and algorithmic embodiment is revealed. The Quantified Self can be viewed as an articulation of the algorithm as a metaphor for the idealized worker, but it is also forced upon the worker as a tool of surveillance. Above all, workers in the platform economy are given a false notion of freedom. While Uber, for example, gives the driver the freedom to work when they desire, their income is rendered precarious by their classification as “independent contractors,” rather than employees, and the governance of often faulty algorithms. Through this, one can see how the ideology of the entrepreneur of the self fits perfectly well with the neoliberal profit motive. The integration of algorithms alongside the rise of the platform economy has created a perfect storm of increased surveillance, precarity and labour rights violations. For these reasons alone, any efforts to organize workers in the platform economy will require taking these factors into careful consideration.

Concluding remarks

While the introduction of algorithms into the workplace may have increased efficiency and profit margins, their repressive consequences are far less discussed. Under the surveillance of algorithms, workers are pushed to meet unrealistic quotas, maintain a level of self-governance in absence of a human manager and are ultimately pushed into more precarious labour circumstances. The replacement of human mediators has effectively rendered employment relations in the platform economy into isolated,

algorithmically corrected functions with no trace of human nuance. Finally, under neoliberal governmentality, workers are expected to function as algorithms by becoming entrepreneurs of the self. As a result, platform economy workers are expected to absorb any risks that emerge as “independent contractors,” leading to even greater instability.

It is evident that organizing the platform economy will require thinking beyond traditional tactics. Understanding how algorithms function in the workplace and everyday life reveals how pervasive and ultimately repressive they are, while at the same time, acting as a metaphor for the idealized worker. While uncertainty about the state of the labour movement remains, new challenges provide new opportunities to game the logic of the system towards liberatory aims.

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