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Spring 2015

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The Hedgehog Review, vol. 17, no. 1 (2015).

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The Algorithmic Self

Published in *The Hedgehog Review* (Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia), March, 2015.

Abstract

To negotiate contemporary algorithms of reputation and search, we are increasingly pressured to adopt an algorithmic self, one conditioned to maximize exposure and approval. This algorithmic selfhood may be critical to finding job opportunities (or even maintaining a reliable circle of friends and family) in an era of accelerating social change. But it can also become self-defeating or worse. Many important algorithms remain stubbornly opaque amid rapidly changing social norms. A cyber-vertigo results, as we are pressed to promote our algorithmic selves but puzzled over the best way to do so.

There is a delicate balance between using new technologies and being used by them. There are few experiences more anaesthetizing than the Pavlovian cycle of posting, liking/faving, being liked/faved, and “engagement” online. Without a stronger sense of commitments that endure above and beyond the feedback and control mechanisms of Big Data and big platforms, we are doomed to selves comprehensively shaped by them. Criticism of algorithms must go beyond a condemnation of the emptiness of virality or the numbing self-reference inherent in the algorithmic economy’s obsession with “metrics,” “engagement,” and “impact.” We should also work to recognize and preserve those fonts of value and cultural meaning that are so rarely encoded into dominant algorithms.