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Algorithmic Accountability & New Technology

Enhancing Algorithmic Transparency

How can public policy enhance algorithmic transparency and accountability while protecting against political or commercial manipulation?

The Issue

Digital platforms have become central to how people around the world find and share news and information. Currently, each platform operates under its own rules and conventions, including what content is shown and prioritized by algorithmic infrastructures and internal company policies. The global news industry in particular – which relies to a significant degree on digital platforms to reach audiences – has articulated the need for a better understanding of how algorithms rank, boost, restrict and recommend content and target consumers.

It is critical to enhance transparency in and accountability for how digital platform algorithms function. The key challenge is that regulating or mandating transparency sounds simpler and more straightforward than it is. What forms of transparency are necessary or effective for protecting and promoting an independent press and an open internet? What does transparency mean to policymakers, journalists, researchers and the public, and what are its limitations? How can we enable algorithmic transparency in ways that protect against political and commercial manipulation or abuse and ensure user privacy? What should qualify as an algorithm? And who should be empowered to set these rules?

Transparency alone will not address all issues surrounding digital platforms, but it is a critical first step toward developing approaches to algorithmic accountability that support an independent, competitive press and an informed society. These approaches must promote transparency while protecting against the risks of political and commercial manipulation, particularly when it comes to who regulates transparency requirements and who benefits from them.

What Makes It Complex

I. One hurdle in creating valuable algorithmic transparency is being sure that those on the receiving end are armed with the necessary knowledge to assess these processes.

II. Determining the parameters of transparency is challenging to do in a single policy.

III. Digital platform regulation needs to protect against political and commercial manipulation as a consequence of algorithmic transparency.

IV. Platforms' commercial structures are real factors to be considered, both in the way they can negatively drive internal decisions and in the value they bring to our digital environment.

V. Debates around transparency introduce important opportunities and risks for the relationships between governments and platforms.

VI. Policy must balance transparency and accountability against user privacy concerns when applicable.

Find the full issue primer, current legislation, events, and changemakers online
https://go.innovating.news/oL4H0M

State of Research

Research focused specifically on digital platform algorithmic transparency represents one small segment of work surrounding digital platform governance. To date, this research sheds light on the varying forms of transparency different stakeholders expect. For instance, public transparency via disclosures looks different from, and accomplishes different aims than, research transparency via data access. Research findings have also noted the challenges legislative efforts face in addressing algorithmic transparency, ranging from potential free expression violations to individual privacy infringements.

Looking forward, there is much that we do not yet know about digital platforms' algorithmic infrastructures. Experts have called for independent researchers and civil society to be granted more access to the inner workings of digital platform technology companies, the algorithms they develop and the trace data they collect – particularly as digital platforms steadily move away from more open models of free data sharing through their APIs. Of course, what access to give to whom is itself part of the debate about transparency. Still, access, when it has the appropriate safeguards, can help to better inform policy-making and contribute to democratic processes as a form of checks and balances on government and corporate power.

Notable studies

Understanding social media recommendation algorithms
Knight First Amendment Institute (2023)

> *Summary:* Understanding the basics of recommendation algorithms is a critical first step toward gaining clarity on which details matter for transparency.

> *CNTI's Takeaway:* This report offers a clear and detailed explanation of how social media recommendation algorithms work that is useful for policymakers, journalists, researchers and other stakeholders.

State of Legislation

Legislative policy around addressing algorithmic transparency and accountability more broadly is still nascent. While some technology companies have taken steps internally to improve organizational transparency, governments are beginning to consider policy initiatives that require specific forms of platform accountability, with a focus on (1) supporting research access to data, (2) protecting user data privacy and (3) disclosing certain content moderation practices.

The establishment of international ethical frameworks for platform accountability is complicated by the fact that most institutional structures for oversight, such as review boards or ethics committees, vary greatly by country. Nonetheless, policymakers, particularly in Europe and the U.S., have called for international cooperation when it comes to facilitating transparency and access to cross-platform research. Experts have also called for multistakeholder and (supra-)national legislative efforts to govern digital spaces.

Notable legislation

United States: The Platform Accountability and Transparency Act was reintroduced in Congress in June 2023. Central elements of the act (along with the Digital Services Oversight and Safety Act) include provisions for researcher access to platform data, public access to advertising libraries and disclosures on viral content. The Biden administration may also seek a deal with European regulators to harmonize access for U.S. researchers with provisions in the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA).