

Teaching Critical Algorithmic Evaluation: Social Media and The Datafied Self

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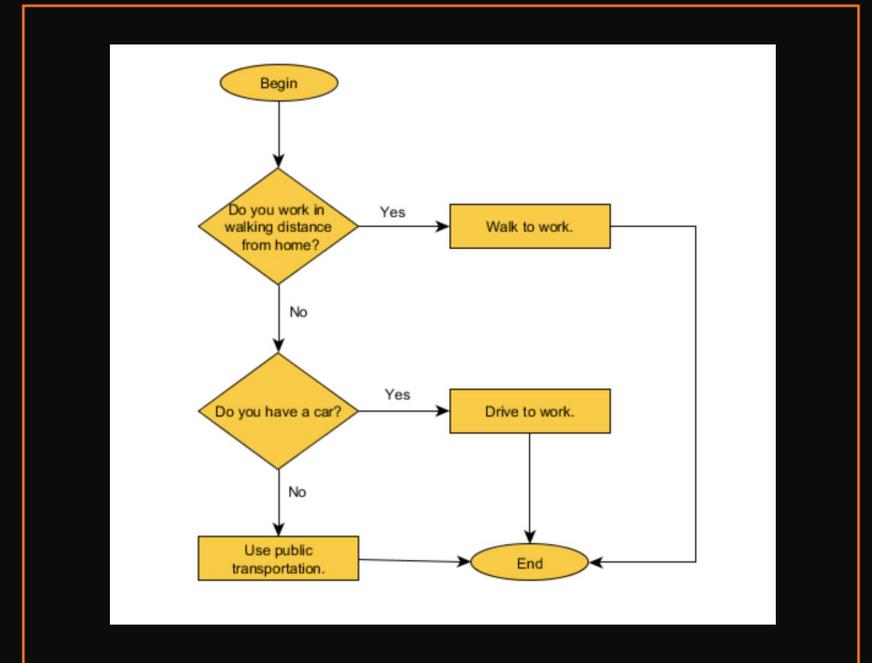
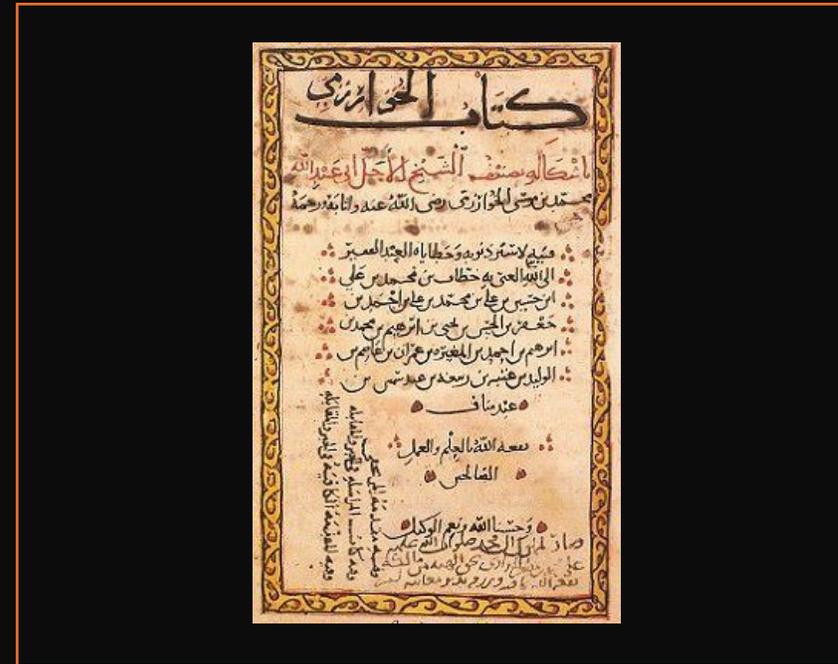
UNC Charlotte

Media Literacy Matters Conference 2024



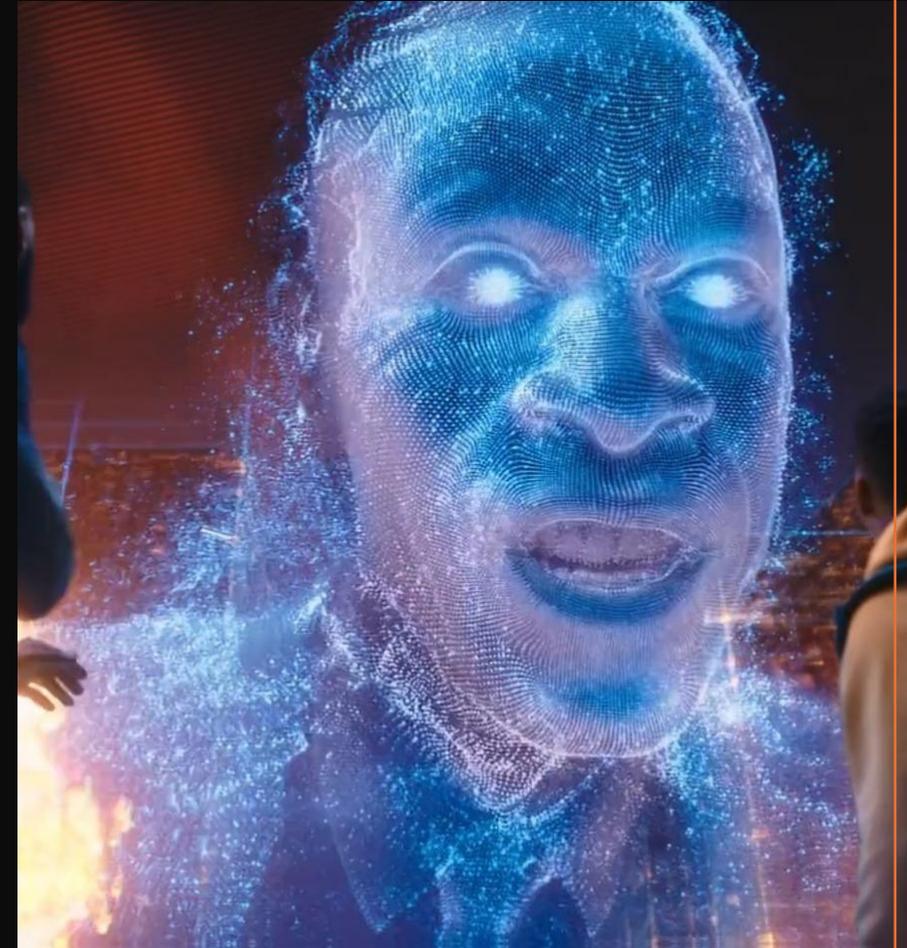
The algorithm

- Derived from 9th century Muslim mathematician
 - Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī
 - Produced first extant text on algebra
- Algorithm—a mathematical or logical term for set of instructions
 - Form the basis of modern mathematics
 - Coding—translating algorithms to computers
 - Software composed of many coded algorithms produced desired output from hardware (p. 180)



Algorithms in everyday life

- The “algorithm” has become cultural shorthand for a variety of learning AI processes (Grandinetti, 2021)
- Algorithms embedded and everyday
- Must be understood as:
 - Performing entities that evaluate and transform data (Parisi, 2013)
 - In relation to social engagements of which they are a part (Dourish, 2016)
 - Through the “folk theories” of how individuals perceive algorithms (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2020)



Critical approaches to evaluating algorithms

- Understand algorithms as intrinsically cultural
 - Enacted by diverse practices
- Ethnography allows approach to algorithms as part of culture
 - Constituted not only by technical procedures
 - But also by people, institutions, context, and ordinary life
- Algorithms not as abstract procedures, not as forces on culture, not as unknowable
- Algorithms instead intertwined with everyday life, meaning making, multiplicity, knowledge production



The assignment

1. Social media presence

- Create a Twitter (now X) and Instagram account as a group.
- Fake persona or random junk □ stick to the plan

2. Feed the machine and take notes

- What did you post?
- What was suggested for you? Who/what tried to follow you?
- What did you see in your feed?
- How did the content suggested for you shift over time? What seemed to take it in that direction?
- What kinds of products/services were advertised to you?
- How do you feel about what you are seeing?

3. Final reflection



Key takeaways

- What did you do? How did you create this Twitter and Instagram presence? What guided your decision making about posts?
- What did you see? How did your growing presence lead you to connect with others on these platforms? What kinds of things were suggested for you?
- Why do you think these connections happened?
- How did others start to engage with your accounts?
- How might we relate this activity and why you did to some of the conversations in the course about platforms, big data, digital labor, data collection, AI and algorithms?
- What can we learn about value generation and capitalist engagement in a digital era from doing this activity?