

Mark Andrejevic
Automated media
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In his latest book, Mark Andrejevic seeks to present a framework for understanding automated media and their social, political and cultural consequences. Automated media are approached as “communication and information technologies that rely on computerized processes governed by digital code to shape the production, distribution and use of information” (p. 29). Such automated media are increasingly permeating our daily lives, mediating our interactions with one another and the world. The book sets out to explore what is labelled a “cascading logic of automation”, referring to how automated data collection leads to automated processing, which then leads to automated response/decision-making (p. 9). This logic of automation produces new forms of power and control, as well as an anxiety that automated media in the end will supplant human autonomy (p. 10). The book—which Andrejevic (p. 21) argues is a critique of the implications of automation for politics and subjectivity—is centred on what is described as a “bias of automation” through the logics of pre-emption, operationalism and framelessness.

The book starts with Ray Kurzweil’s fantasy of reaching immortality with the help of digital technology and how this promise of “technological immortality is inseparable from that of automation” (p. 1). When we in connected societies increasingly rely on automated forms of data collection and information processing, Andrejevic (p. 2) predicts that subjectivity will also become automated, as automated systems claim to know us better than we know ourselves. Automation is not only about anticipating our needs and wants, or detecting anti-social behaviours in the interest of a greater good. Automation also

addresses a perceived problem of uncertainty and unpredictability that supposedly threatens systems of control, management and governance. Just as industrialized mass production allowed the offloading of physical labour onto machines, “automated media offload sociality onto digital systems” (p. 7), something that is referred to as “social deskilling”.

Current deployment of automated media exhibits three inter-related tendencies which Andrejevic (p. 18, with reference to Harold Innis) labels biases of automation, these being pre-emption, operationalism and environmentalism. Pre-emption denotes automated media’s preoccupation with the prediction and hence anticipation of our desires and behaviours. Operationalism is about the displacement of narrative accounts by automated responses, privileging action over understanding. Environmentalism (with reference to Michel Foucault) indicates a mode of governance that dispenses with subjectification through acting directly on the environment.

Andrejevic (p. 30) underlines a post-social bias in automation, an attempt to displace social processes. He explores some shortcomings of this bias, such as the replacement of comprehension with correlation and of explanation with prediction and pre-emption, the triumph of efficiency over other social values, and an imperative of total information collection. According to Andrejevic, the attempt to master all available content and to become fully aware of all that is out there is a “fantasy of total information capture” (p. 35). Such fantasy pre-empts experience, pre-emption being an attempt to disarticulate knowledge from experience. In the book, Andrejevic (p. 37) exemplifies this with Nicholas Negroponte’s famous prediction that one day we will be able swallow a pill and know all Shakespeare.

In the chapter on automated culture, Andrejevic (p. 45) argues that discussions of automated content curation need to be considered within the broader context of the offloading of social processes onto automated systems. This is not only about information but about the disposition of information, and the factors beyond content that are implicated when outsourced to automated media. Filter bubbles are used as an example of the erosion of the possibility of hearing the concerns and arguments of others. Andrejevic (p. 68) thus predicts the dissolution of the infrastructures and practices that enable the forms of representation, reflection and deliberation upon which judgement relies.

In the chapter on pre-emption, Andrejevic (p. 80) underlines “a temporality of the future-present”—i.e. a pre-occupation with the future and prediction, which predictive policing systems exemplify. This is about an obsession with patterns, at the same time as automated media shape the contexts in which patterns operate. Surveillance becomes environmental and agency is reduced to detectable patterns. In the following chapter, Andrejevic (p. 96) argues that the city is not just a site for capital re-investment, but also for the extraction and monetization of data, all made possible through the data collected and the patterns mined for automatically, freeing humans from having to manage society as well as underlining our willingness to surrender to the appeal of automation (as has also been described by Jarzombek in his 2016 book on digital Stockholm syndrome). The end point becomes the automation of judgement (hence a cascading logic of automa-

tion). In the chapter on framelessness, the imagination of a viewpoint from everywhere and nowhere is discussed, a purely objective representation that leaves nothing out. In the final chapter, Andrejevic returns to subjectivity and what happens to agency and politics when desire becomes automated.

Andrejevic's critique of automation and its implications for society is very interesting and well put. However, it remains unclear sometimes whether this is a warning of what might happen if we succumb to automated media with their biases and logics, or whether he is attempting to describe the current state of connected data societies. As he refuses to be nostalgic and end the book on a note of hope (see p. 164), it seems that the book is the latter—a description of the situation we are already in. But to really pull this off, more empirical backing would be needed. As a reader, you get the feeling that automated media, systems and technologies always work perfectly and that we humans can do nothing about them. I doubt it is as straightforward, or inevitable, as it seems when reading the book. The use of the metaphor of cascading to describe the logic of automation is somewhat deterministic. I am not convinced that increasing automation of data collection and its processing will necessarily lead to decision-making becoming automated in the future. It reminds me of the anti-drug campaigns at school as a kid—if you take one sip of a marijuana joint, the next thing you will find yourself shooting heroin into your veins.

Another concern I have is what Andrejevic (p. 30) describes as a post-social or post-political bias as automation attempts to displace social processes with mechanical ones, replacing humans, human judgement and decision-making by automatically sorting and correlating our captured data points into patterns that pre-empt and predict human behaviour. But is this really the case all the time? Having studied algorithmic automation within a newsroom context myself, a post-social bias was not apparent. Instead of a complete tech takeover, my empirical data rather underlined the complexities of automation. Negotiations and deliberations between actors—human as well as non-human—played a central role when automating tasks that were previously executed by journalists. Journalism may indeed be a very particular, and not very representative, institution for critiquing the larger picture Andrejevic attempts to draw; but studies of algorithmic automation in journalism underline that deliberations still take place and humans are the central actors in social processes (see Lindén, 2017; Milosavljevic & Vobic, 2019). In other words, social deskilling is not only about offloading sociality onto automated and digital systems, but also about giving rise to new forms of hybrid socialites.

Having addressed these concerns, there is no doubt that Andrejevic's book is informative and addresses important questions. There are arguments in this book I find extremely useful in understanding and critiquing artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms and automated systems. For example, the "imperative of total information capture" (p. 33) underlines that for an automated system to make fully accurate predictions about our behaviour, it needs not only big data, but all data. But as Andrejevic underlines, a total

system of rules, whose application to all possible eventualities is determined in advance, makes no sense. To determine all possible eventualities in advance, automated systems would either have to store and access an infinity of data, or have to exclude some possibly relevant data from their calculations (see also Dreyfus, 1972). Addressing this as a “fantasy of framelessness”, a purely objective, exhaustive and definitive representation that leaves nothing out (pp. 115, 126), I consider very illuminating. In other words, there are a lot of goodies and food for thought in reading this book.

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