# Brief Reviews of Books and Products

Algorithms of Resistance: The Everyday Fight Against Platform Power.

Emily Villanueva

# BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

In *Algorithms of Resistance: The Everyday Fight against Platform Power*, Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré explore how human agency is exercised to both resist and take advantage of the algorithms and platforms that shape modern life. The book presents a framework that places human resistance to algorithmic power along a dual continuum, with one axis representing the moral economy, a term which refers to the moral aspects of economic activity, and the other axis representing algorithmic agency, or the intentional actions that people take to influence algorithms. Time, capital, and expertise are the qualities that Bonini and Treré argue differentiate one's position in this framework, which is informed by ingrained power structures. Using ethnographic data from the fields of gig work, culture, and politics, the authors demonstrate how algorithmic agency manifests itself as individual or collective forms of resistance in a book that is timely, engaging, and well-written.

The audience for this book are those interested in Science, Technology, & Society (STS) studies, digital media and platform studies, and information studies. Tiziano Bonini is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Siena in Siena, Italy, with a focus on culture and communication, and Emiliano Treré works at Cardiff University (UK) as Reader in Data Agency and Media Ecologies. The authors' respective experiences researching at the intersection of sociology and digital media studies make them uniquely qualified to address the ever-increasing presence of platform powers in everyday life.

*Algorithms of Resistance* is easy to navigate, well-cited, and clearly laid out. It begins with an overview of the key themes in the book and their connections: algorithms, platforms, agency, and resistance. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the book's framework, which is the dual continuum at the intersection of moral economy and algorithmic agency. Moving forward, *Algorithms of Resistance* explores resistance as a manifestation of algorithmic agency in three main arenas, each with its own chapter (Chapters 3 through 5). Chapter 3 focuses on algorithmic resistance among gig workers, primarily those employed as drivers and food couriers. Bonini and Treré discuss the many practices that gig workers partake in that exist outside of their platforms' moral economies, ranging from individual acts such as refusing an unreasonable delivery order to collective acts such as Uber and Lyft "surge clubs" to obtain higher

compensation for drivers. This chapter is a standout in the book, and the authors include rich interview excerpts and examples from their research team's fieldwork in Asia, Europe, and Central America, demonstrating the far-reaching implications of their work into the moral economies of gig workers.

The next arena is culture, i.e., cultural industries. In this chapter (Chapter 4), the authors examine the "platformization of cultural production" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) and the ways in which this phenomenon is changing how cultural content is created, shared, and consumed. In particular, Bonini and Treré discuss visibility as the key factor to success in an increasingly online world, focusing on two examples: fans of the Korean popular music (K-pop) group BTS gaming Spotify to increase music streaming numbers; and Instagram engagement pods. This chapter then presents Bonini's digital ethnography of Instagram engagement pods, consisting of groups of users who aim to bypass Instagram's Terms of Service in order to heighten the visibility of their accounts via increased engagement. With visibility as the main predictor of profitability, Bonini and Treré put forth a convincing argument that this becomes the impetus for both individual and collective acts of resistance and manipulation on Instagram and across a range of social media platforms.

The final industry that *Algorithms of Resistance* tackles in Chapter 5 is politics. Using studies from the Global North and South that Treré himself was involved in, Bonini and Treré demonstrate how algorithms have been used by people with power to sway political opinion through trolling campaigns, propaganda, and more in acts made possible by their institutional power. They then turn their focus to algorithmic activism, a less-discussed form of algorithmic politics done by those without institutional power. Their discussion centers on the manifold ways that platforms and algorithms have transformed how activism and collective action work, as well as the ways that people manipulate algorithms to amplify messages, hijack messages, or evade algorithmic detection. In this chapter, Bonini and Treré emphasize the agnosticism of algorithmic activism, noting that this activism is equally employed by people of all belief systems and political affiliations.

This book is open access and one of the first books to explore the idea of algorithmic resistance to platform power through extensive ethnographic research and fieldwork. Although *Algorithms of Resistance* is not directly related to librarianship and scholarly communication, the research presented has important implications for the future of information work in a platform-mediated world, especially regarding ways that information workers can resist the increasing power of algorithms. The title of this book may bring to mind Safiya Noble's best-known work, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018), but Bonini and Treré have framed their findings more positively. Although Bonini and Treré acknowledge the power that algorithms and platforms have on society at large,

they also note that people are finding ways to resist. Through the fields of gig work, culture, and politics, they demonstrate how workers and online communities are fighting back, whether through small acts of individual resistance or through the collective actions of coordinated groups. *Algorithms of Resistance* is a timely book that equips and empowers its readers to resist platform power by demonstrating how pervasive algorithms already are in our lives and how individuals can game the system and take back agency.

## REFERENCES

Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society, 20*(11), 4275–4292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694

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## BIOGRAPHY

Emily Villanueva is an early career librarian working as the Science and Scholarly Communication Librarian at the University of Lethbridge in Lethbridge, Alberta. She has a Master of Library and Information Studies and a Master of Arts in Digital Humanities from the University of Alberta, which stemmed her interest in the relationship among digital media, culture, and information studies.