Josh Simons, *Algorithms for the People: Democracy in the Age of AI* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023).

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Artificial Intelligence's explosive integration into various facets of human life has become a subject of widespread discussion. This has led to the publication of new books and literature on the topic to debate the good, the bad and ugly societal impacts of this technology. Like other critical domains vis-à-vis AI, it is essential to see the interplay between AI and democratic values to comprehend its future implications for the general public. Authored by Josh Simons, Research Fellow in Political Theory at Harvard University, who earlier worked as a Visiting Research Scientist in AI at Facebook, the book, *'Algorithms for the People: Democracy in the Age of AI'* is a very recent take on the subject.

In his 320-page analysis, Simons scrutinises the intersection of advancing Machine Learning (ML) through AI and democratic values. The book unfolds in two distinct sections. The initial part probes into critical values like fairness, discrimination, and equity, exploring how AI shapes and is shaped by these principles. The latter half presents case studies of major digital platforms, including Facebook and Google, examining the profound impacts these entities have in the context of AI and democratic values. He concludes by stressing the

need to prioritise public interest over generating advertising revenues, ensuring diversity through the presence of more voices and values on digital platforms, and promoting shared principles through a civic information architecture. Recognising the challenges to democratic values in the age of AI, Simons calls for articulating more robust regulations for ML. He emphasises the complexity and variability in human perceptions of concepts like fairness, equity, and discrimination, compared to how machines might interpret or apply these concepts highlighting the significant difference in understanding and application between human and machine perspectives. Throughout the book, his arguments are backed up by real-life instances witnessed on various occasions in the Children, Youth and Families Office (p.14), Criminal Justice Section (p.36), Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) (p.38). The examples vividly highlight the discrepancies that exist, particularly vis-à-vis race, despite the claimed efficiency and fairness of ML.

The book's eight chapters skillfully dissect the profound influence of Facebook and Google on our collective perceptions. These chapters offer insightful analysis, illustrating how Facebook has revolutionised social interaction by creating a digital public square, where conversations and connections unfold in new, often unanticipated ways. Concurrently, Google is depicted as the modern equivalent of a public library, meticulously organising and shaping our information ecosystems. This nuanced exploration aids readers in comprehending the substantial roles these platforms play in structuring both our online interactions and access to information. Simons shows us how the algorithms embedded in these platforms do not reveal the information we require; instead, they curate and prioritise the information we should consume based on the preferences of ML. By asserting that the ongoing technical inventory powered by ML systems possesses political qualities, the writer reveals that these platforms reflect features of our social world with undertones of racial discrimination. The inherent bias in these systems is undeniable, particularly in areas like predictive policing, where the subjectivity of human data labelers often eclipses democratic principles. This bias

extends to influential platforms like Facebook's Newsfeed and Google Search, which have evolved into potent political instruments. They not only influence what we are exposed to but also significantly shape our perceptions, subtly guiding our understanding and opinions on various topics. This highlights the crucial impact of algorithmic choices in molding public discourse and opinion.

Josh Simon's most impactful insight is the revelation that ML-driven decision-making, rooted in historical data, might fail to foresee or adapt to future changes. This reliance on the past as a predictor of the future can inadvertently anchor us to the status quo, stifling innovation and the exploration of novel paths. Additionally, the book thoughtfully argues that democracy is not static but an ever-evolving process. Each generation is tasked with reimagining and reforming institutional structures to reflect democratic ideals relevant to their era's unique challenges. Thus, it is crucial to continuously reassess our interests, cultivate values, redefine concepts, and guide AI governance to align with future democratic principles. By doing so, we can ensure that governance structures remain flexible and responsive, capable of adapting to the dynamic needs of evolving societies.

'Algorithms for the People' highlights a critical challenge for policymakers, centring on the contentious debate over the principles shaping the design of ML in the public sphere. It underscores a persistent discrepancy between the technical explanations of ML processes and the institutional justifications offered by those who deploy these technologies. This discrepancy underscores the urgency for policymakers to fully comprehend the implications and adapt their strategies to the evolving landscape. The book advocates for the creation of robust oversight mechanisms, such as the proposed AI Platforms Agency (p. 185) and the AI Equality Act (AIEA) (p. 103), to effectively regulate these technologies and address their inherently political nature. Additionally, it calls for a more active engagement of civil society in the decision-making process, ensuring that societal concerns are adequately considered and addressed in the governance of ML tools. This approach aims to bridge the gap between technological advancement and its societal impact, fostering a more

balanced and equitable integration of ML into our public and institutional frameworks.

This book makes a timely and significant contribution to the discourse on AI's growing influence in our daily lives. Each chapter begins with thoughtfully selected quotations, enhancing the reader's engagement and connection to the content that follows. Simon's persuasive style effectively communicates the core arguments, though some readers may find the book's structure less captivating. In fact, some may argue that while the book is engaging, it falls short of fully aligning with its title, which suggests a comprehensive examination of AI's impact on democratic values. Instead, its primary focus is the digital landscape, particularly in the context of Facebook and Google's influence on democratic principles. A more precise title could have provided a clearer indication of this focus.

To gain a deeper understanding of the concepts discussed, readers might benefit from first exploring *'Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies'* by Nick Bostrom. This foundational text could offer valuable context and insights.

Despite areas for improvement, the book is a worthwhile read, especially for those keen on understanding AI's impact via digital platforms. It offers valuable perspectives for policymakers, aiding them in making more informed decisions about AI governance. Furthermore, its broad applicability makes it a beneficial resource for any citizen interested in comprehending the intricacies of AI in our modern world.