Elliott Anthony (2023) Algorithmic Intimacy. The Digital Revolution in Personal Relationships. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 220 pages. ISBN: 978-1-5095-49818

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Algorithmic Intimacy, as Anthony Elliott claims, is *not* another contribution to the "soaring studies of the AI revolution" (2023: 1). Admittedly, this initial confession somehow strikes a chord as it has become increasingly difficult to keep track of such a prominent theme in the social sciences. A wide range of work in fields such as science and technology studies, sociology, political sciences, or communication studies now deals with the dangers, risks, benefits, or opportunities of different phenomena often subsumed under AI. The increasing attention to machine learning technologies in our everyday lives is not surprising—given the massive investments in AI by international corporations or the design of entire national strategies in which states project AI to build geopolitical futures (Bareis and Katzenbach, 2022). The difficulty of AI in public discourse lies in the combination of fuzziness, overuse, and its presumed technological power, which often clouds this notion with mystery or fear. The "Digital Revolution" is brimming with buzzwords; AI has long become its most prominent one.

Algorithmic Intimacy carefully avoids any mysteries, but neither does it downplay the transformative potential of machine learning technologies. The book describes the recent proliferation of automated and predictive algorithms that mediate our intimate ways of being with others. It aims to carve out elements for a critical social theory of intimacy in our digitized life. How are social bonds and interactions experienced and negotiated in the human-machine interfaces that connect people? How do algorithmic technologies shape our longing or desires to build ties to and with others?

It is a reasonable starting point to explore these questions with the book's somewhat counterintuitive title—Algorithmic Intimacy, which challenges some common assumptions about the nature of algorithms and human togetherness. While social intimacy seems to evoke physical proximity, personal experience, and emotional encounters, algorithms, by contrast, appear concealed or invisible, virtual, and mechanistic. What are the implications of considering intimate social relationships "in the face of machine-learning predictive algorithms and the emergent variety of intimate connections modeled in the image of computational code" (Elliott, 2023: 12)?

The book begins with two conceptually oriented chapters that lay out how algorithmic technology and automated platforms are transforming what sociologists once identified as the social cornerstones of intimate life: face-to-face interaction, lasting togetherness, profound knowledge of one another, sometimes also confidentiality. Elliott then proceeds by examining three main domains in which intimacy is algorithmically reconfigured and which form the book's main structure: "Relationship Tech," "Therapy Tech," and "Friendship Tech." Each chapter presents several examples of how technological products shape the intimate feelings of togetherness and connection: erotic engineering app claiming to match suitable dates or optimize sexual activity;

chatbot therapists and conversational agents cultivating self-care and improving mental health; various (social) media platforms connecting new digital friends. The book's examples illustrate the key features of algorithmic networking: automatization, machine rationality, and predictive analytics. Elliott explains these concepts convincingly, drawing on social theory and engaging in a dialogue with other recent work on AI, such as the books by Louise Amoore (2020) or Helga Novotny (2021)—two important scholars that are repeated points of reference.

A key priority for the book is individual agency, personal behavior and experience, as well as their embeddedness in specific social, cultural, and economic contexts. The efficacy of machine learning technologies and algorithmic products can, after all, only be explained by the concrete practices and decisions of users (or consumers). As Elliott argues, "women and men – and the existing institutions in which they live their lives – choose to respond to the opportunities and risks of digital revolution" (p. 162). His recurring insistence on reflecting personal experience and behaviors in AI fields such as big data, crowd psychology, and cloud computing makes this book particularly worthwhile to read. It provides the reader with a distinctly critical understanding of how automation and prediction engage users in personal digital intimacy projects: working on the self, consuming digital relationships, optimizing the psyche.

In Elliott's examples, erotic engineering in "Relationship Tech" usually creates a specific ideal of relationship that can be consumed easily, allowing to eliminate challenging decision-making and responsibility in choosing partners. In "Therapy Tech," chatbots and conversational agents provide digital users with permanently available therapists that reverse psychoanalysis' promise of personal liberation through continued self-reflection and engagement with the unconscious. Instead, they tend to exploit today's "confessional culture" (p. 105) of social media and offer therapy as manageable project of self-awareness. Likewise, in "Friendship Tech," the book emphasizes the rather simplistic emotional and (pop-)psychological foundations of friendships promoted and actualized by emotional AI

chatbots. The problem with this ideology, one could summarize, is that it idealizes principles of self-care, affirmative and authentic selfhood, and emotional survivalism when in fact, in most cases, the visions of networked intimate bonds appear rather dubious and infantile. They promise a form of companionship that is constantly available, non-judgmental, and arduously affirmative. Elliott problematizes this as "pathological optimism" (p. 111)—a description that applies to many of the products of algorithmic intimate action and manifests itself in the incentives to share, like, or re-tweet personal opinions and authentic feelings as a seemingly inherent positive values of self-expression.

For most parts of the book, Algorithmic Intimacy is written in a sober diagnostic style, sometimes at the expense of a more detailed presentation of the cases that are at the core of its arguments. There is only little reported on the diverse types of infrastructural work, such as designing, monitoring, and repairing algorithmic systems, software programs, or apps. Who, and what exactly, is involved in these practices of infrastructuring? And what to make of the many failures, bugs, and errors of AI products that "the" user encounters? Also, we still lack a detailed engagement with the distinct categories of users or customers, which are so often subsumed under the black-boxed notion of "society." Algorithmic Intimacy is nonetheless a very important critical introduction to a broader field of research and convinces us to delve deeper into the digital revolution of what we consider our most personal spheres of life.

Elliott concludes with a chapter on "Versions of Algorithmic Intimacy," which reminds us that individuals perceive and experience intimacy in different ways—also, and especially, through algorithmically generated forms of connection. This final chapter might be read as a more forward-looking conversation about the (yet-to-be-realized) potential of multiple experiences, shapes, or forms of intimacy—a horizon of plurality that is so far only mimicked by the products of the AI industry. The dilemma of automated, intimate activity is experienced as what Elliott calls "a *living through* of the crisis of digital revolution" (p. 161), profoundly altering our relationships and social

bonds. The danger seems to be that algorithmically oriented lifestyles and intimate action, instead of creating new meaningful ways of togetherness, "automate or mechanize at the level of the individual subject what are, in actuality, social problems" (p. 103). They thus ultimately risk fueling alienation and loneliness in an increasingly networked world. If their focus remains so strongly on self-optimization and escaping the complexity of social life, these technologies lure the individual into magical belief that they can solve fundamentally social problems. Most of today's products of automated intimacy then appear to be more like the digital versions of what Adorno called the occultists, astrologists, and spiritualists: "With their blunt, drastic answers to every question, [… they] do not so much solve problems as remove them by crude premises from all possibility of solution" (Adorno, 1994: 167).

Algorithmic Intimacy is not a simple warning of a dystopian future of out-of-control machine intelligence. Instead, it is about the one-dimensionality of today's industrial AI products and their promises of simplicity and conformism in social relationships. It is therefore also an emphatic call to delve deeper into the multiple ways in which algorithms will shape the interior self, create new digital identities, and define our being-with-others.

References

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