

## Calling to account: *Coded Bias* and the politics of (in)visibility

Increasing aspects of our lives are controlled by mundane interactions with predictive and predatory algorithms. Some of these processes are visible, others are not. Credit checks, Netflix recommendations, and personalised adverts are just some of the coded technologies that mediate our present: limiting access, influencing consumption, and restricting our very ability to see.<sup>i</sup>

*Coded Bias* is a straightforward talking-head documentary, exposing the bias at the heart of the codes that saturate our everyday. Placing Joy Buoloamwini at its centre, the film plots the course from a student project obstructed by racialised code to US Congress in a public call for accountability. More than anything else, through its centring of experts – mainly women, and women of colour – the film unmask urgent ethical questions about the relentlessly unfolding future of unregulated and undemocratic technology.

The extreme consequences of this emerge under conditions of emergency, when a state of exception can be drawn, through which rights can be eroded and freedoms erased under the political guise of security and order. Stop and search figures over lockdown in 2020 reflect emergency powers in practise. Stop and search numbers in the UK dramatically increased despite a fall in crime. Young Black men were stopped by the Met 22,000 times between March and May, the equivalent of more than a quarter of Black 15-24 year olds in London. With more than 80% of these searches leading to no further action, such a spike in incidents goes to show the disturbing racialised implications of emergency policing. But what happens when this racial bias is uploaded directly into facial recognition software that the police are already piloting?

Algorithms, like a virus, can spread bias on a massive scale. Blind faith in big data is pushing expansionism in globalised private enterprise, with scant regard for the ethical implications. As *Coded Bias* shows, machines now learn through gargantuan data harvesting and classification, the processes of which are happening inside a black box unknown even to the original programmer. With select corporations pushing such technology, an a-symmetrical power dynamic has been established, that holds no one to account and leaves no room for appeal. With no strict regulation, whoever owns the code makes the rules. And saturated with bias, algorithms are currently deciding what we *deserve*.<sup>ii</sup>

Joy Buoloamwini is calling these systems to account through her Algorithmic Justice League. *Coded Bias* is a hopeful film, calling for transparency, oversight, and awareness. Its illustrative inserts – rolling computer code, body scanners, and a talking red light (reminiscent of HAL) – are generic

quirks of artificial intelligence documentaries that verge on parody, but it is the film's framing of its experts and the questions they pose that hold it all together.

One of the clearest takeaways from the documentary is the dangerous shift towards what Tara McPherson terms lenticular logic: a way of organising the world based on discrete modules and fragments, suppressing relation and context in order to manage and control complexity.<sup>iii</sup> This reductionism programmes narrow understandings of race, gender, ableism: fixating on sameness or difference, effectively securing bias into machines. The consequences of this coding are most extreme towards those who are already the most marginalised in society, and whether visible or not, as our lives become more and more mediated through screens due to lockdown measures, these biases are spreading faster than ever before.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, political messaging on Facebook is different depending on who you are.

<sup>ii</sup> Criminal risk assessment algorithms in the US are determining the rehabilitation services particular defendants should receive or even the severity of their sentences.

<sup>iii</sup> Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," in *Race After the Internet*, edited by Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York & London: Routledge, 2012).