

Algorithms in Practice:
Comparing Journalism and Criminal Justice

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Abstract

Algorithms play an increasingly important role in highly skilled fields and organizations. Though advocates for Big Data promise that algorithms will make decision-making more informed, objective, and accountable, there is little research to date focusing on actual practices and representations relating to algorithms in expert fields, or in other words on their reception rather than their production. This article fills this gap by comparing how algorithmic tools are used in two fields with distinct characteristics: web journalism and criminal justice.

Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in web newsrooms and criminal courts, this article argues that algorithmic techniques do not eliminate discretion, as is often claimed by advocates and critics alike. Instead, discretion shifts instead to new, unintended places in the organization. First, I find that there is often a gap between what organizations say about algorithms and how they actually use them – a process known as “decoupling.” Second, I identify a gamut of buffering strategies, from foot-dragging to gaming and open critique, among the people who use algorithms in their daily work. Last, I argue that algorithms constitute different kinds of symbolic resources for web journalists and legal professionals. This in turn helps understand why analytics are less strongly opposed in journalism than in criminal justice.