

# Live Without Algorithms

Wenjing Liu

## Outline

For this project, I am interested in exploring how algorithms seize the right to control body and time from humans. Algorithms, a prescribed set of well-defined rules or instructions for the solution of a problem in a finite number of steps, have become more visible in our daily lives than ever before in this digital era. We undoubtedly live in a world surrounded by algorithms.

We celebrate because algorithms in search engines help people gain quick and helpful answers, navigation app helps people choose the shortest route to their destination, CCTV Cameras assist polices in catching criminals through face detection. Everything appears to be moving toward a brighter future. Unfortunately, the truth is a little different. Algorithms function as a systematic instrument to exploit every single rider's time and labour in the takeout industry to maximize profits.<sup>1</sup> Whatever algorithms function as, good or bad, we and algorithms deeply bind together. To see how close my life is to algorithms, I'm going to schedule and document a period of time where I don't use any algorithmic functions. Living without algorithms implies that I will not use any devices or equipment that have an algorithmic function. This will be the last step in the project. Before I fully dive into a no algorithm world, I would like to create a set of HOW questions to get a general sense of our relationship with algorithms. For example, how do we buy an unfamiliar item without the support of algorithms(search engines and online shops), how do we take a perfect selfie without an AI-driven camera processor, and how do we reach a randomly picked destination without navigation applications.

As Martin Heidegger discussed in *The Question Concerning Technology*, believing that technology is neutral and under our control is the worst and most dangerous way to think.<sup>2</sup> The truth is that technology is a Pandora Box. We will never be able to close it if we open it. It develops beyond our comprehension and control.<sup>3</sup> Algorithms take control of our bodies and time and deeply shape our form of life.

## Why does the project need to be undertaken?

Algorithms are ubiquitous. We love them most of the time because they make our lives easier, sometimes we hate them because they limit the scope of acquiring information.<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Negroponte stated, "Like air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only by its absence, not its

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hansen (韩磊), 'Delivery Riders, Stuck in the System (Translation) 《人物》的《外卖骑手，困在系统里》' 翻译成英文' *Medium* (blog), 13 September 2020, <https://medium.com/@daokedao1234/delivery-riders-stuck-in-the-system-translation-%E4%BA%BA%E7%89%A9-%E7%9A%84-%E5%A4%96%E5%8D%96%E9%AA%91%E6%89%8B-%E5%9B%B0%E5%9C%A8%E7%B3%BB%E7%BB%9F%E9%87%8C-%E7%BF%BB%E8%AF%91%E6%88%90%E8%8B%B1%E6%96%87-98fcff2c01fb>.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', *ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS*, n.d., 14.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger.

<sup>4</sup> Axel Bruns, 'Filter Bubble', *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (29 November 2019), <https://policyreview.info/concepts/filter-bubble>.

presence.”<sup>5</sup> Algorithms as a kind of digital existence sometimes are visible, most of the time not. In this day and age, when the utility of applications is deeply embedded in our brains, it is critical to reveal the deep connection between humans and algorithms. I am not aiming to ask people to refuse algorithms, but rather to raise their awareness of the dark side of algorithms.

### **Readings and/or independent research has led to the project**

The initial idea of exploring the connection between the human body and algorithms comes from a book *Image in the Post-millennium*. One of the chapters mentioned, “AI algorithms in apparatus chip become a kind of virtual advisor with the power to make decisions about what is best for its user’s photos and to manipulate them accordingly.”<sup>6</sup> This phrase alerted me that I was unable to make a fully autonomous choice on a digital device. Algorithms silently affect my decision. In *Algo-Ritmo: More-Than-Human Performative Acts and the Racializing Assemblages of Algorithmic Architectures*, Dixon Roman discussed algorithmic discrimination in various applications such as Uber and Google.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon implies that algorithms are not objective entities. The quality of an algorithm is determined by the company’s programmer. In this case, our behaviour and decisions are influenced in part by their factory settings that represent the company’s will. What also indicated the negative side of algorithms was an article titled “Delivery Riders, Stuck in the System.”<sup>8</sup> This text highlighted the algorithm’s function in designing riders’ delivery routes and controlling their time, indicating that the right to control the human body was temporarily taken by the algorithm. It is terrible that people seem to ignore the existence of algorithms, which is similar to Heidegger’s opinion about people thinking concerning technology. Heidegger points out that we lost the direct bond with resources with the development of technology. Similarly, as algorithms advanced, we had fewer opportunities to interact with a diverse range of people. For instance, before the popularity of navigation applications, people used physical maps to navigate and would ask the local residents about the best way to their destination in a foreign city. This interaction between people is necessary to get the right direction. Nowadays, we no longer ask strangers for navigation most of the time.

### **Personal motivation**

As someone who used to become addicted to Tiktok, its recommendation system had a significant impact on me before. After spending a significant amount of time on Tiktok in a day, I always blamed myself for a lack of willpower. I gradually noticed that its recommendation system functioned as an accomplice to keep me in front of Tiktok. This was the first time I became aware of algorithms’ negative power. The algorithm controls my eyes and brain.

For me, who is deeply immersed in the digital world, living without algorithms is a form of meditation. It could help me gain a better understanding of the relationship between the human body and algorithms.

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<sup>5</sup> WIRED Staff, ‘Negroponte’, *Wired*, accessed 20 March 2022, <https://www.wired.com/1998/12/negroponte-55/>.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Joao Baltazar, *Image in the Post-Millennium: Mediation, Process and Critical Tension* (Onomatopoe, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel Dixon-Román, ‘Algo-Ritmo: More-Than-Human Performative Acts and the Racializing Assemblages of Algorithmic Architectures’, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 5 (October 2016): 482–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616655769>.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen (韩磊), ‘Delivery Riders, Stuck in the System (Translation) 《人物》的《外卖骑手，困在系统里》翻译成英文’.

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