

Algorithms of Oppression (Introduction)

This handout explores Safiya Umoja Noble's introduction to her book, which challenges the idea that search engines and artificial intelligence are neutral or objective tools.

Key Concepts to Know

- **Technological Redlining:** The way digital decisions and algorithms reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling.
- **Algorithmic Oppression:** The structural ways that racism and sexism are fundamental to the design and output of algorithmically driven data.
- **The Myth of Neutrality:** The false belief that because algorithms are based on math and code, they are "benign, neutral, or objective".

Discussion Questions

1. **The Human Element:** Noble argues that "mathematical formulations to drive automated decisions are made by human beings". How does the "antidiversity" manifesto mentioned on page 2 illustrate the connection between the people who build technology and the products they create?
2. **The Search for "Black Girls":** Noble describes her 2010-2011 searches for "black girls" yielding pornographic results as the first hits. Why does she argue this is a "corporate logic of either willful neglect or a profit imperative" rather than just a technical glitch?
3. **Information as a Public Good:** The text states that Google is an "advertising company, not a reliable information company". What are the dangers of a society relying on a private, profit-driven corporation to be its primary source of information?
4. **The "Glitch" Excuse:** When Google Photos tagged African Americans as "apes" or Google Maps linked a racial slur to the White House, the company often apologized for "inappropriate results" or "glitches". Why does Noble reject the idea that these are just "one-off moments"?
5. **Monopoly and Democracy:** Noble suggests that large technology monopolies like Google need to be broken up or regulated. In what ways does the consolidation of information power pose a "threat to democracy"?

Short Writing Exercise: The "Neutral" Technology Critique

Prompt: In the introduction, Noble references Latoya Peterson's argument that "racism is the fundamental application program interface (API) of the Internet" and that oppression "runs the same scripts over and over".

Task: Write a 250–300 word reflection addressing the following:

- Identify a "seemingly benign" technology you use daily (e.g., social media feeds, auto-complete text, or map routing).
- Based on Noble's arguments, how might this technology be "black-boxed" or masking social inequality?
- What would it look like if this technology prioritized "social and human context" over profit or advertising interests?