Chapter 18
Decolonizing the Curriculum in the Age of Digital Structural Violence

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ABSTRACT

There is a robust scholarship critical of how technology (particularly artificial intelligence, AI) displaces human agency. Terms like algorithmic coloniality (Mohamed, Png, & Isaac, 2020), data coloniality (Couldry & Mejias, 2020), digital neocolonialism (Adams, 2019), and digital structural violence (Winters et al., 2020) reflect growing concern about AI's potential to exacerbate dehumanization. Uncritical acceptance and passive resignation are untenable responses for ethical education about one of the most significant phenomena shaping the world our students already inhabit. The onus is on scholars to update social justice-oriented curricula to reflect the digital world as a key site for analysis regarding structural inequality. To that end, we offer this piece as a synthesis of the issues and recommendations about how we

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might unlock the black box and immunize our students against technology-induced isolation and thoughtlessness. It is incumbent on democratic educators to feature digital structural violence as a necessary topic within culturally responsive curricula.

INTRODUCTION

We tend to teach and learn about social justice as though equality evolved from an oppressive past when discrimination was rampant to a more enlightened present. Part of why this occurs is that social justice issues are largely discussed through the perspective of groups gaining legal rights. In the 20th century, it made sense to frame inequalities in the context of legal issues because the law was often the main obstacle to enfranchisement such as in the case of suffrage and integration. The legal framing of discussions about inequality gave the impression of linear progress, providing a narrative that oppression resulted from earlier misconceptions now corrected by a system that largely works.

Regrettably, this story proved false as rises in hate crimes, overturning of legal rights for those with minoritized gender and sexual identities, increases in police violence against Black and Brown communities, and economic class polarization have upended the story of linear progress. If we fixed these problems legally, why do they persist and, in many cases, why did they get worse? We do not argue digital structural violence as the sole cause, but we do see it as a greatly underappreciated one.

Part of why digital structural violence is so difficult to see is the taken for granted assumption that algorithms are neutral. In fact, the hope was that their non-humanness would correct the problem of bias since they have no thoughts or feelings of their own. Unfortunately, this did not turn out to be the case because thought machines feel neutral, they contain and enact their creators' biases. This phenomenon can be seen in algorithms that confuse African Americans with gorillas in facial recognition programs, falsely translate Arabic words into language that suggests terrorist acts in translation software, and classify LGBTQ texts as negative by sentiment analysis tools (Gebru, 2020). If algorithms were truly objective, their errors would not so closely mirror common societal prejudices. Hence, we need to teach students to look behind the proverbial curtain and learn more about who and what influences the digital technology that shapes them.

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