

Algorithms

Learn about how and why algorithms matter and how they influence our online experiences.

1. What Are Algorithms? Why Do They Matter?

Algorithms are, essentially, a set of instructions that a computer program follows to perform a task or solve a problem. Algorithms are increasingly everywhere and have a huge impact on our online experience, often dictating what we see and hear on different platforms, the recommendations and ads we experience, and even decisions made without our knowledge, such as hiring decisions governed by platforms powered by algorithms.

Algorithms are designed by humans and can reflect the biases that humans have. As a result, many algorithms can be discriminatory and can reinforce discriminatory practices.

Being aware of algorithms and the effects they can have is a key part of digital literacy and digital security best practices.

2. Managing Algorithms

While you can't avoid algorithms, you can manage their impact and influence. Try the following:

- Break out of echo chambers:
 - Seek out other kinds of information
 - Avoid just relying on algorithmic recommendations online
- Evaluate your information:
 - Consider the information you are seeing. Is it high quality and accurate?
 - Consider using resources provided by your local library instead of relying on your feeds to provide you with news and other information
- Change how you see results
 - Check out your different social media sites to see if there are ways to see results in a different way

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- See if you can select “recent” results rather than algorithmically determined trending ones, for instance
- Turn off alerts and manage your screen time
 - Algorithms are used to keep us engaged on social media sites. Be mindful about the time you spend on social media
 - Consider ways to manage your screen time
 - Limit how and when you get alerts
- Manage your online privacy
 - Algorithms rely on data from us to work and show us “relevant” content. Manage your privacy settings and practice data minimization to limit how much these algorithms learn about you

Suggestions for social media sites:

- **Facebook:** On the NewsFeed select to see “most recent” posts rather than top stories
- **YouTube:** Turn off autoplay
- **Instagram:** Check your followers to see who you most interact with and who you least interact with to determine if you want to make some adjustments. Consider deleting the app on your phone in favor of using Instagram from your computer
- **Twitter:** Select to “see latest Tweets” rather than trending or top ones

3. Exploring Algorithms

Select a few different sites for this activity:

1. Your favorite web browser: _____
2. A browser you rarely use: _____
3. A search engine you rarely use: _____
4. A social media site: _____

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5. A private browser like DuckDuckgo: _____

6. A browser on your phone: _____

Next, run the same search on a topic of your choosing across these different sites and platforms. Use this space to note any differences in the results you are seeing:

Now, reflect on why you are seeing certain kinds of results on certain platforms. Use the space provided: