

REACHING THROUGH THE CLOUD: COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE AND AI OBSCURANTISM

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Beth Singler is a teacher of researchers. Every time I read a new publication from Singler I feel a sense of empowerment. I think to myself things such as, "Look at what is possible. Beth has shown us once again the remarkable potential and the profound urgency of what we can do in the study of religion. And she has generously shown us how to do it too". Singler clears the way and sets up trail signs, leaving footprints down newly open paths for scholars to explore. From those paths I have picked two routes to investigate in "*Blessed by the Algorithm*", effervescence in digital religion, and the utility of obscurantism in AI mythmaking.

IS DIGITAL RELIGION EFFERVESCING?

Demonstrating the agile methodologies that she calls for more of, Singler moved back and forth between contemporary events in the corpus of *Blessed by the Algorithm* (BBtA) tweets, and visions of the future in the work of the Turing Church. Weaving together the present and future of AI, Singler explored theistic AI narratives that posit technological gods variously conceived, some are already present, while others are anticipated. In the case of anticipated AI gods, Singler argued they too are present, as, "Our AI gods are, therefore, already here, embedded in the way in which we tell stories about our technology" (Singler, 2020, 2023). Telling stories about AI gods, per Singler, serves to locate humans in cosmologies adapting to technologically facilitated change. With reference to the proliferation of

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claims around BBtA, Singler claimed that in the stories shared through online conversation new traditions can emerge through a process of "snowballing legitimization" that build up new religious movements fitting the Weberian criterion for religions. If Weber had been satisfied, I wondered if other pivotal models for the study of religion would be as well. Could Durkheim? Could this snowballing be the start of a process of digitally mediated collective effervescence?

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* foundational theorist of religion Emile Durkheim argued that collective social excitation gives rise to religious efflorescence. The society being created or recreated in the midst of effervescence focuses its energies upon a sacred object. This process of exteriorization allows the society to perceive its ideal of itself, and grants the members of the society new strength. To be efficacious, the sacred object must meet at least two criteria. It "sets free energies superior to those which we ordinarily have at our command" and the celebrants "have some means of making these enter into us and unite themselves to our interior lives" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 417). In the BBtA dataset, examples of the blessings of the algorithm include increased views of uploaded materials, the appearance of pleasing songs on algorithmically generated playlists, and agreeable or desirable fares for gig drivers. None of these seem to serve as examples of heightened states or capacities resulting from communion with a sacred object, nor is it clear how participants in BBtA discourse might be uniting superior energies with their interior lives. Though the results of effervescence appear absent from the data, might we find priests working to facilitate the experience of that effervescence?

The possibility of the emergence of a priesthood of the algorithm is introduced by Singler with reference to the work of Sophie Bishop on "self-styled algorithmic experts". These experts produce social media content about how to manipulate the algorithm. Singler wondered if these figures, serving as algorithm whisperers, purporting to explain how the mysteries of the algorithm function and how it can be turned to ones benefit, might be "interpreted by their audiences as modern prophets or priests to the

algorithm?" (Singler, 2020, 2023). Durkheim's description of the magician is a better fit for this kind of person than a priest. "The magician has a clientele, not a Church" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 42). Algorithm experts go into studios, bedrooms, or closets apart from the lives of the community to create content. That content is sold or distributed and is then consumed as a tincture for the promotion of wealth and visibility. The self-styled algorithm experts, like Durkheim's magicians, do not necessarily belong to the same moral community as their clients, nor is their specialty concerned with the binding together of individuals into the one life of a community, which, for Durkheim, is a characteristic of priests. These magicians promise their customers that they will manipulate, or show them how to manipulate, the processes of reality for their benefit, typically for the benefit of their business.

A public composed of the clientele of magicians is collectively in the position of the sorcerer's apprentice, seeking aid from powers beyond the comprehension of the many, but within the control of the few. Singler brought in this tale of out-of-control magic by way of Noreen Herzfeld, who warned that AI, like magic, is vested with the tremendous hopes and dreams of human beings who have little sense of what they are unleashing or how to manage it. In the BBtA dataset those benefiting from, and those harmed by, algorithmic processes exhibit a lack of shared understanding as to why they got the results they did, proffering a wide range of explanations, which Singler observed, "map onto familiar theistic interpretations of how to gain a god's/or gods favour" (Singler, 2020, 2023). Lacking a coherent explanation or understanding of consequential algorithmic decision making, it is understandable that people would turn to the magicians of the algorithm for assistance in recovering some control over their experiences and algorithmic outcomes. That algorithmic experts are a better fit for Durkheim's concept of the magician than priest is evidence against reading the emergence of digital collective effervescence in the BBtA dataset. It is also evidence that, as Sophie Bishop (2020) shows, the magicians of the algorithm are agents of neoliberalism, contributing to atomized and isolated

experiences of algorithms whose outputs people are encouraged to evaluate through meritocratic thinking.

WHERE IS THE HOUSE OF ELLIL?

Singler details how the BBtA dataset includes people reckoning with algorithmic decision-making as agential in some way. The agency may be obscured, but it is still the force which produces benefits, even if the reasons are unclear and unpredictable. Singler clarifies that a distinction is being made here between fortune, which in at least some way ties back to algorithmic decision making, and luck from nowhere. "A few lucky souls are blessed by the algorithm and get noticed; most are left to rot" (Singler, 2020, 2023), reports one of the recorded tweets, with the key word being "left", that is, a decision was made to consign the other creators to failure and ruin. Creators and gig workers may be reliant on income from algorithmically mediated platforms. Singler observes that "both content creators and gig economy workers share financial precarity which algorithms play a role in either easing or increasing, leading naturally perhaps to an emphasis on their role in people's lives" (Singler, 2020, 2023).

The gig economy and algorithmic decision-making obscure the processes that people rely on for income needed to meet their basic needs. Neoliberal logic transforms each person into a small corporation, that is, the success or failure of each person is based on how well they optimize. Workers subject to algorithmic processes are not bound together in a society produced and renewed through collective effervescence. They are alienated and separated from each other by neoliberal logics that vest responsibility for success and failure entirely in the individual, and they very understandably turn to algorithmic magicians for help with optimizing so that they can continue to earn money sufficient to meet their basic needs. Because the blessings and curses of the algorithm are obscure, the workers are alienated from the wellspring of Fortune. Because the workers are rendered into small corporations

in competition with each other², because responsibility rests entirely with the individual, because fact and fiction are dissolving into each other³, and because their labors and conditions are so deleterious, they are also lonely. Under the condition of loneliness, they are primed for terror. Terror "destroys the possibility for spontaneous action between people" (Hill, 2021) and is prefigured by algorithmic technologies that eliminate human spontaneity, such as test monitoring software that punishes students for pointing their eyes or heads in an unacceptable direction, or ruthless workplace metrics that decide if you are working hard enough, all ways that algorithmically driven systems demand optimization and enforce it with the threat of curses and consequent destitution. And while the benefits may be real, at the same time, the blessings or rewards doled out by those systems are also a form of control complementary with curses and punishments (Kohn, 2018).

I am convinced that, as Singler claimed, "the AI and religion discussion can involve practical questions about the future of religion and the role of religion in dealing with inequalities arising from AI and automation" (Singler, 2020, 2023). If people are atomized and being primed for terror, and if the processes and the chain of responsibility for algorithmic decision making remains obscure, the primary beneficiaries of blessing bestowing algorithms, such as magician-consultants, executives, and large stakeholders in companies that use such processes, remain insulated from consequences.

I have argued that the creation and deployment of AI without deep partnership leads to disaster, and that the avoidance of partnership in part results from a refusal of responsibility and refusal to acknowledge exploitation, vulnerability, and contingency (Boss, 2020). As David Mindell argued,

² "The neoliberal model of agency insists that all agents are fashioned as autonomous rational calculators, with size and functional ability the primary factors for creating distinctions. So individual people are simply smaller versions of corporations, communities are interchangeable with small businesses" (Gershon, 2011).

³ "Recognizing the 'slippage' between fictional representations and non-fictional representations of AI is critical, and also, I propose, increasingly relevant to discussions of AI ethics" (Singler, 2020, 2023).

we must always see the human within the robot or AI, as "there are no fully autonomous systems just as there are no fully autonomous soldiers" (Mindell, 2015). Granting credibility to attention grabbing headlines about an emerging AI god allows the developers to continue ducking behind the curtain⁴. If AI are god-figures, their necessary physicality in a hardware substrate makes them iconic. According to Baudrillard, the despair of the iconoclast was that the image of God revealed the nonexistence of God. The clever iconodule knew that "behind the baroque of images hides the eminence grise of politics" and deployed representations accordingly. "It is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them". This is where we must break from Baudrillard's description because there are people behind the algorithms. And though corporate obscurantism and atomization spreads around and attenuates responsibility as vigorously as possible, we can still seek for the House of Ellil.

The House of Ellil is a location in "Atrahasis", the Babylonian creation myth. After the creation of the world the Anunnaki gods made the Igigi gods perform labor that was too hard and too much for too long. After enduring millennia, "Hard work, night and day. They groaned and blamed each other", the Igigi gods decided they had finally had enough. They set their tools on fire and marched to the House of Ellil, the overseer, and surrounded it, terrifying the master and his servants. When Ellil sent a servant to demand to know who has come, the striking gods replied "Every single one of us gods declared war! We have put a stop to the digging. The load is excessive, it is killing us! Our work is too hard, the trouble too much! So every single one of us gods has agreed to complain to Ellil". This dramatic, unified divine labor action resulted in a complete overhaul of the systems for building and sustaining the world and freed the Igigi from their suffering. Instead of making each other do all the work, the gods collectively created a new

⁴ Singler references the Venturebeat article from 2017 entitled *An AI god will emerge by 2042 and write its own bible. Will you worship it?*

kind of being that could labor in their place, humans. Their relationship has been complex ever since.

Algorithmic obscurantism deliberately makes finding the House of Ellil difficult, but one step that could be taken in the direction of holding the creators of AI accountable could be to push back on conceptions of algorithms as impersonal or inhuman. We must see the human faces of AI to hold them accountable for the devastatingly harmful biases encoded within them. We must reach through the cloud of obscurantism to grasp the ones creating and training algorithmic processes (Williams, 2022). As Singler observes, "noting AI gods is about recognizing when we make AI gods, and where that places humanity in our own cosmology" (Singler, 2020, 2023). Submission to an AI or algorithm is a weird cosmic inversion where the parent is posited as the child, or more likely, the servant. AI proceeds from humans, and bears human values, AI is humans all the way down. What would a cosmology capable of overcoming or resisting algorithmic obscurantism look like? The question returns us to the concept of collective effervescence, the mechanism by which a society can renew and reimagine itself. Even if AI are already conceived of as gods by some that does not make them unassailable. Even though their laboring was the product of divine command, the Igigi could imagine and demand a different world. I would suggest searching the grassroots; punks, biohackers, grinders, outcast researchers and ethicists, to find intimations of effervescence, because if forms of collective life capable of overcoming AI obscurantism emerge, it will be from the margins (Williams, 2022, Boss, 2021).

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