Algorithms and Accountability

The aim of this workshop is for you to engage and reflect upon the notion of "algorithmic accountability." We'll ground the exercise in a scenario.

Professor Bot

It's the near-future. As many business experts projected, BAs in English and New Media are in high demand across Canada. People, including you, are now returning to university to earn these important degrees; however, demand is off the charts. In fact, it's so high that all universities now require you to . . . ack! . . . write an entrance essay in English and New Media. Despite the prevalence of bots as both assistants and peers in society, universities do *not* permit you to write the essay with an AI. The prompt for the entrance essay asks you to identify and analyze the relationships between fiction and artificial intelligence. It provides you with several fictions to interpret, and you are given four hours to write your answer in a text editor on a computer that's not connected to the internet.

In a cruel twist, the essay is marked by . . . ***Professor Bot***.

A subscription-based product of Big Four Tech Services, Inc., Professor Bot exists mostly due to demands on academic labour. There just aren't enough English profs available to assess all these essays. But, of course, you're rightfully concerned about how exactly Professor Bot determines whether *your* entrance essay will pass, and you want to know who is ultimately accountable for this "Pro Bot." After all, it stands between you and your English BA.

Next Steps

Your goal is to articulate what you mean by "algorithmic accountability" in the case of Professor Bot. Here are the steps for that articulation.

1. Please take at least fifteen minutes to describe (in writing) "transparency," "qualified transparency," and "ethical and social responsibility" with respect to Professor Bot. What, for instance, would you want to know about how Pro Bot processes data and makes decisions? How has Pro Bot learned to assess English, interpretation, and student writing, and based on what data (e.g., which corpora of fiction and collections of student essays)? Who made and maintains Pro Bot, and in

what relation to universities? Who reviews Pro Bot's work and decision-making processes? And in the last instance, who should be responsible for Pro Bot's assessment of your entrance essay? As you respond to these issues, see "Algorithmic Accountability," by Megan Rose Dickey (2017), and "Algorithmic Accountability: A Primer," by Robyn Caplan, Joan Donovan, Lauren Hanson, and Jeanna Matthews (2018), for details and context, including definitions of the terms used above.

2. After fifteen minutes on your own, gather in groups of no more than five people and then take twenty minutes to combine and consolidate your descriptions of "transparency," "qualified transparency," and "ethical and social responsibility" with respect to Professor Bot.

3. After twenty minutes combining and consolidating, please write on the whiteboard your group's distilled descriptions of "transparency," "qualified transparency," and "ethical and social responsibility" with respect to Professor Bot. Be prepared to share these descriptions with the class, TAs, and me. Your answers should directly address these questions of Pro Bot: "Transparency of what, exactly?" "Qualified transparency according to whom, exactly?" "Whose ethical and social responsibility, exactly?" And, "Ethical and social responsibility determined by whom, exactly?"

4. Now, beneath these answers on the whiteboard, please briefly describe how the "actors" in this scenario would likely respond to your answer to both, "Whose ethical and social responsibility, exactly?" and "Ethical and social responsibility determined by whom, exactly?" What obstacles to accountability might these actors emphasize, and what concerns might they have? Be sure to identify these actors in the process, and to be as specific as possible.

5. Finally, in your log, please use 100-150 words to share your group's descriptions of "transparency," "qualified transparency," and "ethical and social responsibility" and to reflect on what you learned about algorithmic accountability during this workshop. You might even define "algorithmic accountability" in your own words. Feel free to co-author the descriptions with your group, but the reflection should be written by you alone. In the log, also be sure to include the first names of your group members (for the sake of attribution), together with a photograph of your notes on the whiteboard. Thanks!