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For many years, the question of the relationship between media and audiences has been present in communication studies. Do media shape and influence audiences or do audiences appropriate media? This question still exists around platforms and digital communication. Do platforms shape and influence users or do users appropriate platforms? Reality is more complex than this kind of dichotomy. Ignacio Siles presents a critical view of this in his new book, *Living with Algorithms: Agency and User Culture in Costa Rica.*

Siles is a professor of communication and technology studies in the School of Communication and researcher at the Centre of Research in Communication at the Universidad de Costa Rica. His academic training includes a journey through three different countries and languages: a bachelor of science in communication sciences at the Universidad de Costa Rica, a master of science in communication at the Université de Montreal, and a doctor of philosophy in media, technology, and society at Northwestern University. He is one of the most relevant communication researchers of his generation.

In this book, Siles takes the notion of algorithmic cultures as a starting point. He approaches it critically by arguing that too much emphasis has been given to deterministic analyses of the ways algorithms shape the practices of users and not enough attention has been paid to human agency. His proposal leads to an understanding of the relationship between users and algorithms as a process of “mutual domestication.” This means that, although algorithms are designed with an extractivist logic, users apply recommendations of platforms in particular ways in their daily lives. Siles explains five dynamics through which mutual domestication occurs: personalization, integration, rituals, conversion, and resistance.

The text draws on fieldwork that the author carried out with his team in Costa Rica on how people use and make sense of three platforms: Netflix, Spotify, and TikTok. It included 110 interviews with users of Netflix and Spotify and 12 fo-
cus groups with 57 participants. If you, like me, are interested in methodology, please read carefully the appendix, as it includes the research design of the five studies carried out by Siles from 2017 to 2020.

After the first chapter, on datafication, chapters 2 to 6 develop and articulate arguments about each dynamic of mutual domestication. Chapter 2 is dedicated to personalization, which in turn contemplates three dynamics: interpellation, personification, and relationship. These operate in specific ways in platform interfaces, and users exercise their agency by understanding and training them. Integration is approached in chapter 3. The author discusses how users follow (or not) algorithmic recommendations of the three platforms, in terms of identity, group membership, social relationships, tension between adherence to local culture or global relationships, and more. If we talk about algorithmic cultures, this chapter emphasizes culture and the ways this matters and is translated in practices. Chapter 4 is about rituals, namely, the twofold process of adaptation between daily life and platforms, which express the practical and affective meaning of algorithms. Conversion is the dynamic of mutual domestication examined in chapter 5. This connects the self, the public, and algorithms. The last of five dynamics is resistance, discussed in chapter 6. This refers to resistance in ordinary life, as users challenge the platforms and their algorithmic recommendations. Siles argues that these infrapolitical actions “can be interpreted as claims for identity, autonomy, and dignity that explicitly challenge the passiveness attributed to users in dominant approaches to datafication” (p. 166). Finally, chapter 7, on mutual domestication, summarizes the five dynamics and their implications by highlighting the relevance of ordinary life.

One of the main contributions Siles makes in this book is the nuanced approach to datafication, platforms, and algorithmic cultures. This implies not ignoring the power of the extractivist logic of the platforms but also not assuming that users are uncritical and manipulable beings. Instead, he insists on recognizing their capacity for agency in ordinary life. The author opens the book by pointing out that an approach to culture is missing in studies of algorithmic cultures, and it is precisely this approach he provides through his series of inquiries. This emphasis on ordinary life has been present in Siles’s previous publications, such as Networked Selves: Trajectories of Blogging in the United States and France (2017), in which he has already explored the links between subjectivity and digital technology.

Another contribution is related to methodological decisions. The study of algorithmic cultures is sometimes associated with the need for big data, data mining, and digital methods. The author shows that the approach to culture requires a deep understanding of users, and qualitative methods are fundamental for that endeavor.

A further contribution is the context in two senses: the context of approach and the context of production. On the one hand, we need theory built from cases around the world, as is the case of this research done in Costa Rica, a small country in Latin America. On the other hand, such research is still usually conducted by Anglo and European scholars, so producing theory outside of Anglo-centric and Eurocentric circuits, as Siles has done here, is also important, as it brings into dialogue the contributions from the so-called Global South.

This dialogue is only possible if we read the book, compare evidence from different countries, discuss the contributions, and update the debates, as the digital environment is constantly transforming and platforms will continue to be part of our lives, at least for a few more years. Of course, I read the book and wrote this review while listening to music on Spotify. It could not be otherwise.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


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