***Algorithms for Her? 2:***
***Feminist approaches to digital infrastructures, cultures and economies***

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This Special Issue of the *Journal of Gender Studies* is about algorithmic culture. It is about the gendered values and normativities that are encoded into algorithmic technologies and techniques, and the ways in which algorithms in turn shape contemporary gender formations. It is also about the people who help constitute and reify algorithmic culture – from tech developers, investors and entrepreneurs, to policymakers, educators, and ordinary users.

Eran Fisher observes that 'In recent years, almost unnoticeably, algorithms have become close companions. They are now embedded in… almost every realm of life… [shaping] how we experience the digital environment, how we see the world, and how we think about ourselves' (2022, p.1). For the editors of this Special Issue, attention to gender works to make cogent the very real stakes of doing identity and subjectivity formation in the age of such pervasive algorithmic hegemony. Gendered positionalities thus become analytical vectors through which we and our contributors interrogate the complicated, ever-shifting relationship between digital culture, registers of power and (feminist) justice.

That interrogation, and this Special Issue, consists of a three-part invitation.

First, we invite readers to confront popular imaginaries of algorithms. Through a curated selection of commentaries and original research articles, *Algorithms for Her? 2* asks us to pin down what we understand algorithms to be and how we think they work. What presumed impacts and capabilities do we ascribe to these automated systems of production, prediction and classification? It asks us to articulate what and who we understand algorithms to be *for*.

Next, the Special Issue invites readers to transcend the hypothetical by making legible the material and epistemic impacts that algorithmic systems have on gendered subjectivities and knowledges. How, for instance, do algorithmic infrastructures transform gender into actionable categories of control, containment and value extraction? How is gender put to use by surveillance capitalism's business model? And how might approaching gender intersectionally illuminate—or perhaps even compound—the digital making of marginalisation, exclusion and harm?

Finally, the Special Issue's contributors invite us to expand our collective horizon of possibility, and reflect on what better worlds, politics and ethics may be enabled by thinking and doing algorithms differently. By bringing empirical research into dialogue with critiques of contemporary algorithmic formations, this Special Issue ultimately hopes to inspire reparative action. Such action demands algorithmic cultures that are more equitable, inclusive and humane, not just for gendered subjectivities but for all those historically marginalised and disadvantaged by dominant infrastructures of governance and legitimacy.

The need for this sort of transformative thinking and action is both urgent and pronounced. It felt that way back in 2023, when we first started thinking about this Special Issue. We had just hosted a two-day international conference on this topic in Sheffield, UK, and were deeply moved by the intersectional richness, enthusiasm and feminist commitments running through the presentations. The conference highlighted the generative role that feminist frameworks can play in exposing algorithmic biases and mitigating their harms. Meanwhile, participation of delegates from across diverse disciplines, geographies and methodological traditions suggested there was broad demand for doing in-depth analyses at the intersection of critical algorithmic and gender studies. And so, this Special Issue was born.

Two years on, as we write this introduction, we are stunned and dismayed by the project's continued salience. Back in 2023, we never imagined we would see Donald Trump elected to a second presidential term and we were not prepared for the sustained, systematic and global attacks on the rights of minoritised genders and sexualities that followed, nor for Big Tech's active complicity in these emerging politics of hate and disenfranchisement. The Trump administration's assault on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programmes and principles has wrought widespread havoc for gender and sexuality researchers, among many others. In a statement signed by 29 editors of leading sexual and gender-related journals, Graham et al. (2025) note the U.S. government directive for researchers to remove any manuscripts from review that contain terms including gender, transgender, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) and nonbinary; the removal of government webpages that featured these and related keywords; and the suspension of National Institutes of Health grant reviews (p.1). Such sweeping attempts to thwart knowledge production about gender and sexuality—whether through defunding, digital erasure or state-sanctioned intimidation—constitute the context in which this Special Issue appears.

The assault on gender and sexuality studies extends far beyond American borders. Holvikivi, Holzberg and Ojeda's terrific—and terrifying—edited collection on transnational anti-gender politics (2024) makes clear that this is a global problem. In the UK, where the editors of this journal reside, we are fresh off a Supreme Court determination that reduced gender to a purely biological and binary formation (Cooke, 2025). This ruling is widely read as an attack on non-cisgender identities in general and on transwomen in particular, and dubbed 'scientifically illiterate' by doctors at the British Medical Association (Feinmann, 2025). It can also be understood as a juridically-sanctioned diminishment of antidiscrimination protections and a withdrawal of the basic dignity assurances that enable participation in civil society. While the focus and register of these politics may vary across different cultural terrains, they share a common aim: to delegitimise gender, and gender diversity, as a valid analytic. This is a politics that rejects gender as a site of knowledge production that is open to contestation and change. Cumulatively, it is this regressive context that underscores why our Special Issue, and the sort of research it centres, matters. Gender is a complex category. It is a dynamic framework and a life force that does not stabilise or disappear because an autocrat or judge promoting 'biologically nonsensical' ideologies (Feinmann, 2025) wants it to.

At the same time, our context is underpinned by Big Tech's current business model, which relies on the datafication of subjectivity. Here, the global tech industry approaches gender (and its intersections across race, class, sexuality, disability, age, and so on) as a site of value extraction: a category to be mined for predictive 'insights' (Benjamin, 2019; Chan, 2025; Noble, 2018). As the contributors to this Special Issue demonstrate, these gender 'insights' can have wide-ranging impacts on users, including on bodily autonomy and educational access. Crucially, however, tech's incursion into gender transcends the logics of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). This was made painfully clear during Donald Trump's 2025 inauguration, where Big Tech giants gathered in the U.S. Capitol to celebrate his electoral win. Among them were Meta's CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Apple's CEO Tim Cook, Tesla's CEO Elon Musk, Google's CEO Sundar Pichai and Amazon's founder Jeff Bezos (Helmore, 2025). Their presence signalled the formal alignment of interests between the political establishment and the technology industry. Finally, Silicon Valley's departure from their countercultural origins and outsider mythologies (Turner, 2006) seemed complete, with Big Tech's role as an extension, enabler and lynchpin of mainstream, statist authority clearly displayed for all to see. The active collusion between Big Tech and government power has become all the more explicit in the era of generative AI, as the recent Memorandum of Understanding between OpenAI and the UK Government so clearly illustrates. The rapid development and implementation of generative AI systems offer yet another iteration of ubiquitous technologies that have worrying ramifications for marginalised people, spanning issues of representation, uneven global labour hierarchies, and environmental extractivism (Bianchi et al., 2023; Gillespie, 2024; Grohmann, Glatt & Idiz, 2026; Miltner, 2024; Sandoval-Martin & Martinez-Sanzo, 2024).

The tech industry's incursion into the mainstream is not new. Artificial intelligence tools are increasingly embraced by governments and industry leaders (for example, Gross, Bradshaw & Millard, 2025; Milmo, 2025), but over the last 25 years, the broader machinery of internet culture has become so thoroughly embedded in the crevices of everyday life as to be rendered essential infrastructure (Hine, 2015). Indeed, by 2011, internet ubiquity was understood to be so normative that the UN Internet Governance Forum published *The Charter of Human Rights and Principles for the Internet* (2011), a document which deploys the language and legal commitments of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to frame internet access as a universal right.[1] The design, deployment and governance of these technologies and the algorithmic infrastructures that underpin them *matter*. They matter not just for the content they expose us to, but ultimately, for their role in shaping how we live, who we are and who we aspire to be. Accordingly, the contributors to this Special Issue deploy Fisher's understanding of '*algorithms as epistemic devices*, geared toward creating knowledge, which informs users' decisions, preferences, tastes, and actions, and changes the very sense of who they are' (2022, p.1, emphasis added). The algorithmic capacity for enabling existential transformation highlights the urgency of the task before us. It also highlights the need to situate that transformative capacity within our current conjuncture.

[1] The Charter has since been translated into 11 languages, including 3 of the world's most spoken: Chinese, Spanish and Arabic (Statistica 2025).

As we suggest above, this conjuncture is marked by the enmeshment, if not collusion, of geopolitical, technological and corporate power. This consolidation of power and entanglement of cross-sector interests is significant, in part because it narrows the aperture through which legitimacy is read. In other words, when crucibles of hegemonic power agree, the interests of minoritised knowledges, values and subjectivities are instantly endangered. For us, the fact that contemporary global politics lean heavily toward social conservatism, and that government support remains crucial to the fortunes of tech companies, raises serious concerns about how gender and social justice agendas will be served by today's technoindustrial complex. Elon Musk's self-promoting manipulation of X's algorithm (Haeck, 2024) and Trump's short-lived TikTok ban (Pellish & Stelter, 2025) demonstrate the ease with which online platforms of solidarity, joy and pedagogy can be weaponised. Such weaponisation threatens to impact those who already bear the high costs of societal and algorithmic discrimination. Namely, minoritised genders. Worst hit will be people of minoritised genders who also inhabit other minoritised positionalities across sexuality, race, class, age, disability, location, etc. In other words, the already marginalised risk further marginalisation in today's algorithmic mainstream.

Recent scholarship has brought increased visibility to critical perspectives on algorithms that centre inclusivity, intersectionality, reflexivity and feminism. Work by Cathy O'Neill (2016), Virginia Eubanks (2018), Safiya Noble (2018), Meredith Broussard (2018), Ruha Benjamin (2019), and many others has been instrumental in shifting the discourse from the technicalities of AI to analyses of how those technologies impact society – how they delimit what we think we know, how they circumscribe access to resources, and how they symbolically and materially affect people's lives and livelihoods. The research is clear: AI and algorithmic systems encode and reproduce societal biases (e.g., Bishop, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Glatt, 2023; Chan, 2025); these systems routinely discriminate against the poor, against people of colour, against trans and non-binary folks.

But there is hope. And we absolutely need hope if we want to create a more just, equitable and inclusive world. One part of that project requires us to locate the biases, assumptions and normative values embedded in the algorithmic ecology that increasingly saturates everyday life. But the project also requires us—as users, researchers, and designers—to imagine how the digital tools and techniques of knowledge production can be designed differently. Can they be designed to support intersectional justice, and what is required to get us there? This Special Issue seeks to contribute to that research agenda with three expert commentaries and five original research articles. We introduce them below, in hopes that they might inspire future algorithmic justice commitments and interventions, from researchers, activists, tech developers, policymakers and beyond.

**About the contributions**

The Special Issue opens with **Carolina Are's** (2024) commentary on the opaque politics that circumscribe knowledge production in algorithmic platforms and in academic publishing. She

draws striking parallels between the 'hidden forms of content moderation such as shadowbanning and malicious flagging' (Are, 2024, p.1) routinely faced by marginalised content producers and the practices of disavowal that power academic peer review. In each case, content creators' experiences and expertise are systemically discredited. Troublingly, Are shows that this discrediting is compounded for researchers of content creator platforms, and of algorithmic governance more broadly. In its aim to ensure rigour and scientific reliability, peer review necessarily authorises the observed over the experiential, anecdotal or affective. Yet if content creators' stories and experientially-derived knowledges about algorithms are researchers' main datasets, then the academic legitimacy of those datasets is rendered illegitimate by default.

In the next commentary, **Nicolette Little and Tom Divon** (2024) extend the critique on the impossibility of algorithmic reproducibility by highlighting algorithmic culpability in facilitating sexual harassment through personalisation, ephemerality and autonomy which violate models of active consent. Through a focus on two iPhone iOS features—For You and AirDrop—Little and Divon introduce the idea of the 'unsolicited algorithm', which autonomously 'deliver(s) content without user consent, based on automated configurations that result in user predictions rather than acknowledged user intentions, with substantial impacts on users' well-being' (ibid., p.5). In drawing attention to 'the multiple ways iPhones enable unsolicited content sharing' (ibid., p.1), Little and Divon reveal how pairing surveillance capitalism with algorithmic prediction technology can actively weaponise memory and automate harm through the combination of user actions, algorithmic functioning, and overarching corporate strategies (ibid.).

Our next contributor, **Abel Guerra** (2025), approaches tech's capacity for gendered harm not from the user's perspective but from that of the digital culture researcher. Here, the task of understanding the gendered impacts of algorithmic platforms broadens out to incorporate the researcher's own gendered positionality. In so doing, the author makes clear that one's experience of gender necessarily shapes how one reads algorithmic systems, for instance, whether one deems them safe or dangerous, inclusive or othering. By asking how we might understand algorithmic platforms through the prism of embodiments and gender identities which are minoritised or non-normative, Guerra challenges readers to reflect on the generative possibilities which emerge when we do algorithmic research from a starting point of marginalisation. How does that starting point shape what we come to know and how we come to know it? What happens to our understandings of algorithmic power when we, as researchers, are no longer able 'to have our bodies (and our minoritised genders) fade into the background' (Guerra, 2025, p.3)? What happens when we embrace the burdens of our marginalised corporeality?

The legibility of marginalisation is also taken up by **Jess Rauchberg's** (2025) study of TikTok. She considers the ways TikTok 'encode[s] ableist ideologies into (its) algorithmic recommendation infrastructures, reproducing dominant offline beliefs' about 'who belongs in public life' (ibid., p.1). Here, Rauchberg proposes the concept 'algorithmic ableism' to demonstrate how a mainstream social media platform effectively discriminates against

‘disabled and marginalized creators through content suppression and surveillance’ (ibid., p.2). The techniques analysed—including shadowbanning, tagging and surveillance—showcase ‘the sticky relationalities between ableism and interlocking algorithmic oppressions… in platform systems’ (ibid.). Indeed, the political and operative significance of algorithmic ableism is the ease with which it can automate, at scale, the reproduction of marginalisation and the preservation of mainstream power asymmetries. Rauchberg’s reading of algorithmic ableism shows that disability is a *systemic* construction, cultivated through technical protocols that ‘reflect dominant cultural values’ (ibid., p.4) and dominant *structures* of power and inequality (ibid., p.4). In so doing, the concept facilitates ‘an understanding of disability as a fluid political and cultural identity that is always in flux with race, class, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, and size’ (ibid., p.3).

The politics of visibility, and the visibility of politics, also animate **Carys Hill’s** (2024) article on building feminist, subscription-based online communities. Hill’s research brings attention to the difficulties of trying to do feminist collectivity and activism from within a neoliberal digital culture. The research examines the affects, knowledges and power relationships enacted through an overtly political, paywalled online feminist community. Hill considers what discursive, and functional, space remains for DIY feminism when it is intrinsically tied to the surveillance capitalist infrastructures and logics that circumscribe today’s internet. Taking the Anti Diet Riot Club (ADRC) as a case study, Hill addresses this question by exploring what it means to practice feminism through the ADRC’s paid-for social media subscription service, offering a sobering reflection on the deep extent to which monetisation and service logics inflect contemporary online communities claiming to do radical intersectional politics. In forging a dialogue about the durability of an ideological online community through intersections of gender, class and embodiment, Hill challenges us to think beyond capitalism while showing how incredibly difficult that task is.

Our next article by **Lisa Garwood-Cross, Ben Light, Anna Mary Cooper-Ryan and Cristina Vasilica** (2024) returns us to algorithmic governance-from-above. Like Are (2024) and Rauchberg (2025), the authors consider the identities, experiences and knowledges deemed suspect by major social media platforms, and locate how that suspicion gets operationalised by automation technologies. Focusing on YouTube, the article documents the platform’s structural hostility toward sex education content. Its creators ‘regularly battle demonetization, age-restrictions and algorithmic bias’ (Garwood-Cross et al., 2024, p.1), despite their videos not violating YouTube’s Terms of Use or content policies (ibid., p.7). The authors show that this results from a confluence of factors: the algorithmic flattening of nuance, social conservatism, and capitalism’s profit orientation. Algorithmic censorship is pitched as a technique for protecting users and creators, but YouTube’s algorithmic conservatism risks making age-appropriate information about sex and relationships inaccessible to the young people who need it most. Ultimately, this piece provides another clear illustration of how ‘algorithms are inscribed with assumptions about what is important, valuable or unacceptable’ (ibid., p.3).

Sexual harm—algorithmic and embodied—is also the subject of **Rebecca Noone and Arun Jacob's** article on reproductive autonomy 'in a landscape of data violence' (2025, p.1). Noone and Jacob's research documents how, in the wake of the elimination of federally sanctioned legal protections for abortions in America, overlapping interests between tech entrepreneurs, prosecutors, police and anti-abortion activists have worked to 'reify a culture of forced reproduction through the instrument of data violence' (ibid.). This violence emerges from the intersection of geolocation technologies, legal frameworks and the datafication of reproductive bodies. The authors examine the central role that data intermediaries—those trading in location data—play in monitoring and disciplining the reproductive body, working with Anna Lauren Hoffmann's (2021) notion of data's discursive violence to capture the gendered harm 'inflicted by and through data technologies and their purveyors' (Hoffmann in Noone & Jacob, 2025, p.2). This article demonstrates how *corporeal* violence is enabled and institutionalised by supposedly 'immaterial' commercial data tracking and mining practices, illustrating clearly that the production of control, power and marginalisation is a dialogue between online and offline spaces and methodologies.

We close this summary of Special Issue contributions with **Taylor Annabell and Nina Vindum Rasmussen's** (2024) article about Spotify Wrapped. Spotify Wrapped is the platform's annual attempt to show that it 'knows' every one of its 678 million users (Spotify, 2025). Annabell and Rasmussen's project seeks to make sense of such algorithmically-generated 'knowledge' and subjectivity articulation through attention to users' experiences and feelings around their algorithmic encounters. Annabell and Rasmussen discuss the arts-based workshop method they have developed as a means of helping users understand those encounters, giving them an opportunity to respond to a platform's autonomously generated algorithmic projections. The workshops facilitate a dialogue between what the platform produces about a person and users' internal understandings of themselves. The Spotify Unwrapped workshop seeks to disrupt the algorithmic 'process of extracting data and repackaging it to make claims about identity and taste' (p.14). It aims to trouble algorithmic individuation (Prey, 2018) and in the process, to liberate (self-)knowledge from Spotify and similar platforms whose business model users feed by default.

## Conclusion

The pervasiveness of algorithmic systems is by now a familiar feature of everyday life. Our daily experiences and life chances are routinely governed by algorithmic processes of selection, identification and discrimination across a range of key systems, including finance and credit, housing, immigration, hiring and recruitment, policing, and justice (Barocas & Selbst, 2016; Hassani, 2021; Laupman et al., 2022; Rosen et al, 2021; Park, 2019). The fact that these algorithmic systems disproportionately affect those marginalised across intersections of gender, sexuality, class, ability and race is also a widely established—if grim—reality. For the editors of this Special Issue, achieving a more just reality requires an unsparing look at today's algorithmically-generated oppressions and inequalities, and imagining how these might be undone.

Through the lens of gender, this Special Issue considers identity's entanglements with algorithmic imaginaries, realities, practices, political economies and infrastructures, as well as the intersectional harms and omissions that those entanglements often occasion. At the same time, our contributors inspire essential thinking about how algorithmic systems, and our relationships with them, can be reworked to ameliorate identity-based marginalisation, discrimination and harm.

This Special Issue deploys feminist ethics as a political lens by which contributors attend to the prospect of algorithmic justice. The articles contained here foreground the myriad exclusions and misrepresentations that algorithms, and the systems in which they are embedded, sustain and propagate. But the articles also consider whether a fairer and more feminist algorithmic culture is possible, and what is required to get us there.

This project of liberation is advanced by contributors' insistence that to challenge algorithmic culture's inequalities requires us to go beyond critiquing surveillance capitalism's tools and values. Yes, those critiques certainly matter, but they are not enough. In the age of automated, predictive systems of identity categorisation and capture we also need to normalise a totally different relationship with algorithms' epistemic and ontological claims of 'truth telling'. We need to encourage the rejection of algorithmic systems' claims to knowledge, to expose as farcical the idea that digital platforms and data processing tools can know and articulate our identities, our values, our subjectivities and our worth.

The Special Issue contributors suggest we—as researchers, educators and ordinary users—do so by centring user expertise, experience and complexity in our analyses of algorithmic systems. This allows us to get at the ineffable, transient, experiential and affective facets of 'code' and to disrupt tech's presumed authority over what constitutes knowledge and whose knowledge deserves legibility and legitimacy. When we narrate the algorithmic encounter by asserting the authority of our own self-knowledge, we reclaim power . Once we discredit the algorithmic hold on identity capture, different sociotechnical futures are made possible.

Our contributors speak to the complexity, dynamism, and multiplicity of algorithmic production. They make clear that like gender, race, class and identity itself, the algorithm is not a monolith. For this reason, we want to suggest that it is far more helpful—and analytically more interesting—to think about the algorithm not as a thing but as a metaphor. It is a metaphor for power, control, and governmentality: a dominant, if strategically obscured, means of disciplining, punishing, and rewarding.

Online and off, this metaphor shapes our subjectivities, experiences and knowledges. It contributes to our understanding of gender and other identity categories as vectors of worth and as determinants of possibility. That is why the metaphor and this Special Issue matter. In showcasing 'how algorithms exist in the world' (Guerra, 2025, p.5), readers are invited to consider the kinds of worlds, truth claims and visibilities algorithmic culture makes (im)possible. From there, the project of transformation and liberation begins.

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