Anthony Elliott, **Algorithmic Intimacy: The Digital Revolution in Personal Relationships**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023, 204 pp., $22.95 (paperback).

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One of the emerging questions facing scholars of new media technologies today is how to conceptualize the seemingly unpredictable impact of predictive algorithms on our personal lives. Machine-learning intelligence, ranging from social media algorithms to AI (artificial intelligence) voice assistants and chatbots, have been intricately embedded into the fabric of our intimate relationships with the self and with others, as well as nonhuman actants, rendering intimacy an exciting and troublesome field to explore. Throughout his new book, ***Algorithmic Intimacy: The Digital Revolution in Personal Relationships***, sociologist Anthony Elliott invokes the idea of "algorithmic intimacy" to make sense of the vast, pluralistic, yet not readily sensible changes in how people experience, experiment, understand, and navigate intimacy, friendships, love, and eroticism in the age of artificial intelligence.
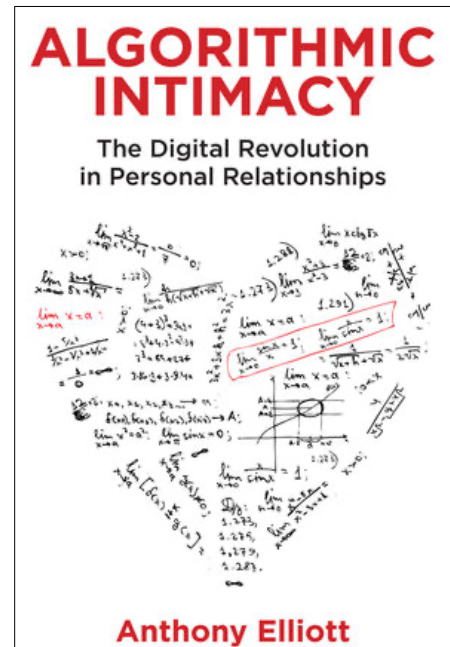
The stories of algorithmic intimacy examined in this book are, first and foremost, about both machine automation and human agency. Algorithm-driven technologies, with their mysterious and tremendous predictive power, come to automate our intimate needs, desires, practices, and routines. Matchmaking algorithms help people to find dates and keep their hearts aflutter with ease, while emotional AI chatbots provide 24/7 nonjudgemental, self-affirmative companionship. Therapeutic chatbots assist in offering affordable and personalized mental health care. In the algorithmic world, the previously enigmatic and elastic intimate realm has become programmable and predictable. But, the opportunities to experience remodeled (and sometimes enhanced) intimacy come at the cost of personal privacy, interpersonal interactions, and human agency in making some of the most important life decisions. As Elliott perceptively notes, "in its digitalized, algorithmic and above all more automated reincarnation as computer code, intimacy is less about renewed dynamism between people and more about the elimination of unpredictability, uncertainty and ambivalence" (p. 11). Algorithmic intimacy is, paradoxically, impersonal from the outset.

However, Elliott does not cast the tension between machine intelligence and human autonomy in a pessimistic or dystopian light, nor does dualistic thinking ever remotely present in this book. His approach to addressing the cultural anxiety and fear about algorithms' harm to human agency and intimate relationships is, as he acknowledges, "full of even-handedness" (p. 40). The aim is to provide a full understanding of the patterning, dynamics, and consequence of algorithmic intimacy by examining its many faces in various sociotechnical and cultural contexts.

Given that algorithmic intimacy is multifaceted and fluid in nature, Elliott starts the book by outlining what characterizes this emerging field of algorithmic intimacy, namely engineered human togetherness, obscurity and ubiquity of algorithms, algorithmic mediation of everyday communication, and lastly, the multiplication of emotional connections. Though the list is not intended to be exhaustive, it captures the key aspects that distinguish algorithmic intimacy from established conceptions of intimacy, yet does not necessarily put a definitive clear-cut boundary between algorithmic intimacy and other forms of mediated intimacy.

The book demonstrates Elliott's ambition to build a social theory about algorithmic intimacy that provides explanatory concepts and heuristic devices to understand the complex process and to spark further investigation and theoretical development. To this end, Elliott brings together ideas from sociologists, historians, philosophers, media theorists, feminist and gender theorists, and science technology studies scholars throughout the book. In particular, he draws from Georg Simmel's thoughts on sociability and intimacy in a world that is largely governed by rationalism (pp. 25–29, 42–47), and Zygmunt Bauman's forms of togetherness in contemporary societies prior to the digitalization of intimacy (pp. 29–31). To Elliott, algorithmic intimacy should and can only be conceptualized alongside the theoretical and historical accounts about intimacy and how intimacy transforms.

This historicization and contextualization approach is presented in the main part of the book, where Elliott delves into three parallel threads of intimacy that are impacted by rising algorithmic technologies: relationship tech (chapter 3), therapy tech (chapter 4), and friendship tech (chapter 5). Such distinction is necessary and productive, as the sociotechnical, historical-cultural particularities, and consequences of these technologies are substantially different. Consistent with this perspective, Elliott also avoids overstating the power of algorithms in reforming intimacy and pays special attention to the other precedential/concurrent technological changes and cultural shifts.

Chapter 3 revolves around how sexual relationships and erotic intimacy is facilitated and regulated in the web of algorithmic dating apps and quantified sex practices. Algorithmic prediction and measurement give rise to a new courtship ritual, an emergent culture of swiping right or left, and a novel mode of experimental intimacy. The case of relationship technology exemplifies the commodification of intimacy, which is bound up with instant gratification, lightness, flexibility, and disposability. Elliott goes further to suggest that people's addiction and even subjection to relationship tech, numbers, and metrics may paradoxically reflect their desires for more control over intimacy and selfhood.

Chapter 4 shifts discussion from algorithms-engineered interpersonal relations to human-machine interactions in the particular cases of automated psychological apps and therapeutic chatbots. Elliott provides a thorough and detailed account of the rapidly growing therapy tech industry, unpacking the promises and actuality of algorithmic therapeutics. Importantly, he points out that the inbuilt upbeat-ness and emphasis on immediacy of algorithmic imperative can hardly help people reflect on their negative emotions and their past, while this new therapeutic culture effectively detaches individuals' journey of self-understanding from intimate relations.

Chapter 5 examines automated companionship driven by friendship tech—including the social network services and more recently, the emotional or conversational AI. This chapter first provides an overview of the digitalization and automation of friendship and cultural shifts of friendship since the early 2000s with the rise of social media and advanced human–machine interfaces. In the second half, Elliott resumes the discussion about artificial substitutes of interpersonal intimacy by focusing on how parasocial relationships are forged between human and smart machines and how such one-sided emotional connections may affect interpersonal friendship dynamics.

Elliott roots his analysis in his care toward the human condition in an algorithmic world. He stretches across various terrains related to intimacy, including identities, lifestyles, gender, sexuality, affect, emotions, and mental health. The book explores how the self and the relations with others are transformed and refashioned in the world where "new automated machines are linked fundamentally to the very conditions of interaction, communication and information diffusion in which people experience emotional life, experiment with sociability and reinvent forms of human togetherness" (p. 39). The book keeps asking the questions: Living alongside algorithms, what are the illusions versus lived realities for people seeking intimacy and personal development? And what are humans' desirable forms of living? To address these puzzles, Elliott always focuses on human's agency and cognitive strategies in algorithmic intimacy—how individuals view themselves and their relation to the world and how they negotiate with the massive algorithmic organization. Such a focus is also demonstrated in the deliberate visibility given to numerous accounts from ordinary people about their everyday navigation in the algorithmic world, such as a blogger who recorded their journey with Woebot, a chatbot therapist, and an emotional AI user, Tim Daalderop, who revealed screenshots of their conversation with the AI and reflected on their emotional up and down. This approach to algorithmic automation of intimate and cultural life also sheds light on how researchers can better understand and analyze the evolving landscape of human–machine interactions, highlighting the importance of preserving everyday users' agency, awareness, desires, and imagination while experimenting and confronting unpredictable technologies.

Echoing the focus on human agency and everyday adaptation and negotiation in their encounters with algorithms, Elliott wraps up his book by drawing upon Habermas' notion of general cognitive strategies to theorize individuals' cognitive experience that conditions their social actions and engagement with algorithmic intimacy (pp. 139–140). He outlines three forms of algorithmic intimacy: *conventional* (focusing on rules and regulation), *cohesive* (community- and solidarity-based), and *individualized* (emphasizing self-exploration, imagination, and invention) algorithmic intimacy, each with their own qualities and potential effects in how people perceive, forge, and sustain intimacy. These three cognitive-cultural frames not only paint a fuller picture of the multifaceted landscape of algorithmic intimacy but also provide a solid conceptual foundation for theoretical development and elaboration.

Algorithmic Intimacy exemplifies how we should approach intimacy in relation to the wider social-technical and historical-cultural assemblage of automated societies. It also brilliantly shows that algorithmic intimacy should be recognized as a theme of special significance that reflects broader shifts in contemporary AI-powered societies. The book will captivate researchers across various fields, including human-machine interactions, interpersonal communication, digital culture—particularly algorithmic culture and critical social theory. Additionally, it will serve as an insightful resource for general readers curious

about the ways in which predictive algorithms and intimate bonds are interconnected and the impact of advanced machine intelligence on their day-to-day lives and personal relationships.