Normative Logics of Algorithmic Accountability

Joseph Donia
Institute of Health Policy, Management & Evaluation, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto
joseph.donia@mail.utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT

The relevance of algorithms in contemporary life is often appreciated when they 'fail'—either because they did not perform as expected, or because they led to outcomes that were later determined to be unacceptable. As a result, academic, policy, and public discourse has increasingly emphasized accountability as a desirable, if not elusive, feature of system design, and component of effective governance. Accountability, however, is a versatile concept that has been operationalized in a number of ways across different use-contexts, policy settings, and research disciplines. While accountability is often framed as a normative good, it is unclear exactly what kind of normative work it is expected to do, and how it is expected to do it. Informed by perspectives from critical data studies and science and technology studies, this article introduces five normative logics underpinning discussions of algorithmic accountability that appear in the academic research literature: (1) accountability as verification, (2) accountability as representation, (3) accountability as social licence, (4) accountability as fiduciary duty, and (5) accountability as legal compliance. These normative logics, and the resulting rules, codes, and practices that constitute an emerging set of algorithmic accountability regimes, are especially discussed in terms of the presumed agency of actors involved. The article suggests that implicit assumptions characterizing each of 'algorithms' and 'accountability' are highly significant for each other, and that more explicit acknowledgement of this can lead to improved understanding of the diverse knowledge claims and practical goals associated with different logics of algorithmic accountability, and relatedly, the agency of different actors to pursue it in its different forms. Link to full text: josephdonia.com/facct-2022

KEYWORDS

Algorithms, Accountability, Ethics, Governance, Agency

ACM Reference Format:
Joseph Donia. 2022. Normative Logics of Algorithmic Accountability. In *2022 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT '22), June 21–24, 2022, Seoul, Republic of Korea.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1 page. https://doi.org/10.1145/3531146.3533123

FAccT '22, June 21–24, 2022, Seoul, Republic of Korea

ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-9352-2/22/06.
https://doi.org/10.1145/3531146.3533123