Technologically Mediated Racialization: Integrating an Instrumental, Epistemological and Ontological Approach

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A recurring theme in studies that aim to investigate racism and discrimination through algorithms is that authors tend to stick to describing interfaces of systems and their social and organizational contexts, rather than the data and algorithms themselves (see Noble 2018; Eubanks 2018; Benjamin 2019). This practice unintentionally instrumentalizes the technologies it is aiming to politicize. I will argue that the source for this confusion lies in a conflation of at least three ways in which mediation could be defined in the investigation of what I call technologically mediated racialization. Racialization is understood here as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group"(Omi and Winant 2015, 64). Within the mediation-as-representation approach, technologies are – often unwillingly – portrayed as mere instruments that can be used to advance a racializing agenda. Studies within this paradigm often blame biases on human factors, such as skewed historical data, racist programmers, or biased users. The mediation-as-translation approach investigates technologies as epistemic actors, each of which offers specific possibilities for racialization. Studies within this approach investigate how the affordances of technologies shape existing processes of racialization. The final approach, mediation-as-ontology, questions how contemporary algorithmic technologies shape the nature of the process of racialization itself. Here, race does not pre-exist its technological mediation, but is a result of the process. For a comprehensive understanding of racialization in algorithmic systems, all of these three levels are essential.