

Algo → Lit

Algorithmic literacy

for effective transparency

in the eu

Barometer of Digital Mediation Practices for Algorithmic Transparency in Europe

Survey and qualitative inquiry
EU/BE/FR/NL

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Executive summary

Algorithms, decisions that derive from them, and AI products are growing among public and private services every day. They determine insurance premiums, subsidy conditions, food waste reduction in cafeterias, and more. Our data, cultural objects, and social relationships are calculated, classified, and guided by algorithmic systems based on predictive and optimization methods.

These systems, sometimes used in complete opacity, are not understood by the wider public, nor, very often, by professionals themselves. In order to better understand their effects and address the problems they cause, everyone should be able to recognize how algorithms manifest themselves in everyday life. In addition, citizens who are most at risk of being targeted or discriminated against through the use of algorithms are likely to lack information and options for action the most.

This is the core intuition behind the ALGO→LIT project. Critical algorithm studies have shown that algorithms are distributed socio-technical objects, understandable only through detailed analysis of the practices of engineers, organizations, and users — far beyond simple source code transparency.

ALGO→LIT therefore aims to improve the algorithm literacy of what we call “digital mediators”, that is digital inclusion workers social workers, ombudspeople, and civil servants helping citizens who are dealing with automated public services - so they can in turn help citizens understand these systems and exercise their right to transparency. We call these professionals “mediators”, because they play a role in providing information to citizens and by doing so broker between the interests of citizens and public institutions.

The project is focusing on three countries : France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. It is through these three countries, through the experiences and practices of digital mediators and their audiences, that we study what they need to help citizens understand algorithms and enact their rights.

This report is part of a larger research into existing training and literacy methods and frameworks, as well as methods to render algorithms more transparent and understandable. The report provides a baseline understanding where information needs are that can inform future educational programs and the development of new training methods.

Research goals and approach

This report documents the findings of an empirical research project into the existing practices and needs of digital mediators explaining algorithms to citizens. We chose to

start on the ground by working with professionals in the fields of digital inclusion, digital mediation (as a personalized, qualified, and community-based support to promote digital inclusion), as well as digital activists through workshops, interviews and a detailed survey.

Before developing training programs, a survey of mediators and digital assistants was conducted - combining quantitative and qualitative approaches - to identify their needs, the algorithms they want to explore, and the practices they already use. The initial findings were then discussed with mediators during [a transnational webinar](#) in december 2025. We also compared these results to our benchmark for digital competency frameworks and our practical guide to activities and projects designed to explain algorithms. This work forms the foundation for prototyping a tool intended for professionals to help them answer citizens' questions about AI.

Key findings

These findings are similar and consistent across all three countries, despite their cultural and organizational differences.

Digital inclusion facilitators and workers have limited and uneven knowledge of algorithms. They struggle to determine whether an algorithm is actually at work, even though they are generally able to recognize algorithmic logic in personalized content and recommendation systems. They themselves have questions about how the algorithms work and how to explain them. They also brought forward the question of discrimination and accountability.

Questions about algorithms are rarely raised spontaneously from their audience, and when they are, it is often prompted by a personal concern, fear or because of a concrete problem people are facing that may or may not be related to algorithms at first glance. Some citizens are interested in "AI" as a popular topic but without reference to a concrete situation. This points to different information needs. It should be noted that these questions come mainly during in-person meetings, information events, and training. These questions from citizens generally revolve around three main concerns : understanding what an algorithm is, how it works, and whether it is possible to avoid it or protect one's privacy. Same as the digital facilitators themselves.

Finally, these digital workers and mediators often feel at a loss as to how to effectively help citizens exercise their rights regarding algorithmic systems. They are waiting for tools and resources to help them address these issues and support citizens. Also, for these interviewees, a process to send citizens to the right organisation able to answer their questions would be beneficial, but not in place yet.

Survey methodology

The survey was self-administered online between November and December 2025 via a Fillout form. A total of 256 responses were collected in the three partner countries: 155 in France, 78 in Belgium, and 24 in the Netherlands. Despite the difference in the number of respondents between countries, the functions of the respondents are similar : digital facilitators, “digihelpers”, librarians and digital workers.

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 20 questions focusing both on respondents' knowledge of algorithmic issues and their training and support needs in relation to algorithmic literacy.

However, several limitations must be highlighted regarding the “statistical” scope of this survey. First, the number of respondents varies greatly from one country to another, which means that the sample cannot be considered representative of structures at the national level, nor can “strict” comparisons be made between countries. It also depends largely on the dissemination networks mobilized by the project partners.

The questionnaire was distributed in different languages, adapted to national contexts, which may introduce variations in interpretation and does not necessarily reflect the institutional and professional realities specific to each country.

That is why the survey results should be considered primarily as a preliminary “exploratory” edition and should be viewed over time as a barometer. The exploratory aspect is mainly aimed at identifying trends, practices, and needs expressed by digital inclusion professionals in order to guide the development of our training content within the framework of the project.

In parallel with the quantitative survey, the consortium conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with digital inclusion workers in each partner country, as well as with nationally and European-recognized experts. These interviews aimed to complement the survey by providing richer qualitative insights into how professionals engage with algorithmic systems, the challenges they encounter in practice, and the specific training or support they consider most valuable. They also helped contextualize differences between countries and identify best practices and gaps in current approaches to algorithm literacy.

This work was supported by a literature review conducted in the three countries participating in the Algo->Lit project.

Country by country : context and analysis

[French context]

Debates have emerged around certain algorithms, highlighted by journalistic investigations. Notably, "[Parcoursup](#)" has determined access to over 10,000 higher education programs for 850,000 students annually since 2018, provoking strong contestation from students and parents, extensive media coverage (Combe et al., 2018), and debates in the Senate and National Assembly (Villani and Longuet, 2018). These controversies illustrate the urgent demand for algorithmic transparency (Faerber, 2023) and mark a new frontier in digital mediation.

In France, laws to render bureaucratic processes transparent have a long history, including the right to access administrative documents. It dates back to article 15 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen: "Society has the right to ask any public official for an account of his administration." In 1978, the CNIL and later the CADA were created to monitor computerized and algorithmic administration. The 2016 Digital Republic Act further mandated online publication of "algorithmic processing" used in individual administrative decisions.

Despite these measures, transparency is limited : no systematic procedure lists all algorithms in use across departments. In 2023, a report by Justine Banuls (Dataactivist) noted that transparency "is implemented in an anecdotal manner." France has no national algorithm registry; this work is carried out by the NGO ODAP (Public Algorithm Observatory), which aims to enhance transparency, support independent evaluation, and provide tools to associations and collectives. Its second inventory, now documenting 120 systems, highlights the difficulty of finding clear information on public AI algorithms: "It is sometimes even extremely difficult to understand exactly what the algorithm does and what its purpose is."

Recently, in 2025, [the Public Algorithms Observatory](#) published the second edition of its citizen inventory, entitled More and more artificial intelligence in public services, but still just as much opacity. Contributors, regardless of their level of expertise, reported persistent difficulties in accessing information on algorithms and AI systems, sometimes to the point of not understanding how they work or what their purpose is. Few evaluations are published, costs remain opaque, and algorithms subject to transparency requirements do not comply with the law. Generative AI is also emerging, with numerous chatbots and tools to assist with writing, transcription, or translation, reinforcing the urgent need for visibility and control.

[French analysis]

Stakeholders' knowledge legitimacy, expertise, knowledge

What about France, and more specifically our audience of digital advisors and assistants, when it comes to the challenges of algorithmic transparency ?

When asked the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how comfortable are you explaining what an algorithm is to other people?”, the average score was 6/10. Two types of responses emerge : those that focus on the tool itself (e.g., ChatGPT and its various models) and those that focus on its uses (social media, profiling, recommendations, etc). We can therefore consider that, overall, participants have a good understanding of what an algorithm is : a recipe, instructions, a calculation, code, etc.

Regarding their ability to detect algorithms, three main points emerge : the identification of personalized, contextualized, and targeted content (“targeted ads, video suggestions, different from one user to another”), automatic processing of requests, and automation. One particular point mentioned goes in the opposite direction : some participants mention the standardization of responses by a robot. Although this response is not very common, it illustrates the perception of the omnipresence of algorithms in everyday life.

While participants reported feeling relatively comfortable explaining or identifying algorithms, their ability to give concrete examples from everyday life was high : 125 respondents were able to cite an algorithm, 23 were unsure, and 7 were unable to give an example. However, when it comes to more specific examples, such as algorithms used by public services (82 participants able to cite an example) or algorithms considered dangerous (83 participants), accuracy decreases.

This point was also raised during a qualitative interview with Garlan Nizon, an independent trainer in digital mediation. She emphasized the need for more examples of algorithms in everyday life beyond the “usual suspects” and for these to be explained in simple terms.

Daily work and audiences

In their work, French mediators deal with a variety of audiences on different topics (access to rights, digital illiteracy, etc.). But to what extent do issues related to algorithmic transparency arise in their daily work and interactions ?

Only 60 respondents reported receiving requests on this subject, either regularly (27) or occasionally (33). For the others, such requests are very rare (43) or non-existent (36). We can deduce that the public is not yet sufficiently familiar with the subject to ask mediators these questions, and that the majority of exchanges focus on everyday

issues, such as rights. This is also reflected in the support methods used: face-to-face consultations and workshops remain the two main forms of support in France for mediators in the context of digital mediation.

When mediators are asked about their perception of the public's knowledge of how algorithms work, the answers are quite clear. Only one mediator indicated that the public understands the basics of algorithms. In contrast, 42 mediators believe that the public has a limited understanding, 46 believe that they have already heard about the subject, and only 26 say that the public has never heard of it.

The questions asked are often general in nature: how algorithms work, definitions ("what are they?", "what are they used for?", "how do they work?"). But many questions also focus on risks and externalities: surveillance, environmental impact, privacy, fear, and even the replacement of humans in decision-making. These questions are consistent with the observation that the public does not necessarily understand how algorithms work, which can raise questions and doubts.

To overcome knowledge challenges, Louis Derrac, director of the Future of Tech program at Latitudes, suggests going further in understanding algorithms to democratize knowledge: first, by providing the tools to understand, but above all, the elements of criticism, and also by having the ability to transform things.

Resources and support

While mediators believe that the public has questions about how algorithms work and the risks they pose, their own questions are both similar and more in-depth, focusing on their profession.

They seek to understand how algorithms actually work, to distinguish between algorithms and artificial intelligence, and to master the art of popularization in order to convey this knowledge. They also question the risks and dangers, privacy, bias and discrimination, as well as transparency, accountability, and the legal framework.

Like their audiences, mediators reflect on societal impacts, the replacement of humans, surveillance, technical limitations, and security, while also taking an interest in ethics, responsible use, and ways to protect themselves or configure algorithms. However, more of them cite the risks.

The majority of mediators do not know how the public can exercise their rights in France: only 32 say yes, 64 say no, and 59 are unsure.

According to them, the most important thing to explain to the public is first how algorithms work, then their social effects, and how to improve one's own use of algorithms. Finally, how to circumvent them if necessary.

[Belgium context]

Since 2020, the Digital Inclusion Barometer of the King Baudouin Foundation (Brotcorne, P., & Ponnet, K. (2024)) has monitored digital inequalities in Belgium. The 2024 edition points to modest improvements in internet access, equipment, digital competencies and the use of essential online services. However, digital inequalities remain significant: in 2023, 40% of the population aged 16–74 was identified as experiencing digital vulnerability, particularly individuals in socioeconomically disadvantaged situations. The findings also highlight the importance of digital mediation, which provides friendly and responsible access to space, infrastructure and connection as well as practical support to vulnerable citizens in navigating digital services.

Digital exclusion from essential services translates into discrimination in access to social rights. Close to one in three individuals report having relied on a third party to carry out online administrative procedures, including 39% of individuals aged 16–24, while women and non-EU nationals are more likely to request assistance. The campaign « L'HUMAIN D'ABORD! » (Flinker, D. (2025, September 4)) and the [open letter of 31 January 2026](#) to the Belgian Government calls for legislation guaranteeing and funding non-digital high-quality cumulative access through physical counters, telephone services and postal communication. The 2025–2029 Federal Coalition Agreement (Belgique, 2025) further highlights the continued commitment to combating the non-take-up of social rights among the most vulnerable citizens such as the elderly and persons with disabilities.

A federal charter for the responsible use of artificial intelligence in public services was signed on 11 July 2025 (Service public fédéral Stratégie et Appui (BOSA), 2025) by over 40 federal administrations committed to ensuring that AI systems adhere to ethical standards, transparency requirements and fundamental rights protections. The charter stipulates that whenever an AI system is used, transparency must be ensured. Individuals affected by such decisions have the right to challenge them before the Belgian Council of State or another competent authority. Even though Belgium does not (yet) have a national algorithm registry, some signatory administrations publish their AI policies. For example, the [INAMI](#) foresees a registry disclosing which algorithms are used, how they function and their purpose. In education, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles has published the [school assignment algorithm](#), but the accessibility remains limited due to complex language, making it difficult for citizens to fully understand and grasp how the system works.

The Federal Public Service of Policy and Support (BOSA) launched a publicly available cartography referencing [AI projects in public administrations](#). An [Advisory Committee](#) on data ethics and AI, seeks to enhance transparency in the deployment of data and AI within the federal administration by empowering civil servants, clarifying

implementation practices, and ensuring meaningful human oversight. Belgium also appointed 26 national authorities under the AI Act responsible for the protection of fundamental rights in relation to high-risk AI systems. These authorities may request access to AI system documentation, including systems used to assess eligibility for essential public services and benefits.

Despite these efforts, effective transparency remains difficult in practice. Transparency rights exist under the GDPR and [Article 32 of the Belgian Constitution](#), and Belgian Commission for Access to Administrative Documents (CADA) considers public-sector algorithms to be administrative documents under the Law of 11 April 1994 (Belgique, 1994) enabling citizens to seek access. Making these rights effective remains a challenge as individuals must identify the relevant authority, submit a formal request and specify the information sought. The fragmented institutional structure, strict procedural deadlines, delays, non-responses and limited enforcement further weaken these rights, while court appeals remain costly.

Civic initiatives have also emerged to facilitate the practical exercise of transparency rights, such as [Transparencia.be](#) and the [Comité Humain du Numérique](#) (Comité humain du numérique, 2024) which frame transparency as a condition for the effective exercise of rights in contexts where algorithmic systems inform administrative decision-making.

[Belgium analysis]

Overview of stakeholders' knowledge legitimacy, expertise, knowledge

Digital mediators in Belgium define algorithms according to four main representations. The most frequent understanding is procedural, describing an algorithm as a sequence of steps used to solve a problem. Another, more technical approach presents algorithms as mathematical formulas, models or parametric systems. A third perspective connects algorithms to digital platforms, seeing them as systems that determine or personalise the content users encounter online. Finally, some respondents highlight data processing and automation, describing algorithms as mechanisms that automatically analyse data to produce specific outcomes. In these descriptions, the terms “software”, “AI” and “program” are often used.

Asked to give examples of algorithms used in everyday life or in other contexts, a majority of respondents (61) answered affirmatively, while 15 indicated uncertainty and only 2 reported that they could not provide any examples. Commonly cited examples include social media platforms, recommendation systems, online advertising, and search engines, while some respondents described algorithms metaphorically as similar to a cooking recipe: *“Just like a cooking recipe: you follow the steps in a specific order to prepare a dish.”* Other respondents refer to specific application domains such as translation, navigation and mobility, facial recognition and smart cameras, banking and hiring. Some respondents mentioned everyday systems used in Belgium, such as [Smartschool](#), as well as international platforms including LinkedIn, Spotify, TikTok, YouTube, and Netflix. Others referred to major technology companies, such as the GAFAM.

When asked to provide examples of algorithms used by public services, number drops as only half of respondents answered affirmatively (38), while 25 indicated being uncertain and 15 reported that they could not provide any examples. Frequently cited examples concern application domains regarded as essential public or societal services, including social welfare and access to rights (8), mobility (7), taxation (5), fraud detection (4), banking and insurance (3), recruitment and hiring processes (3), policing (2), and access to education (2). Other examples point to weather forecasts, chatbots, automated emails and identification platforms such as [Istme](#).

When asked how they recognise the presence of algorithms in everyday situations, most respondents do not know how to determine whether an algorithm is involved. Many participants (20) explicitly state that they are unable to do so. This difficulty is frequently referred to as the opacity of institutional and corporate systems, the perceived “all-presence” of algorithms, and the lack of clear explanations regarding their use. Some respondents do attempt to identify algorithmic involvement, by relying on clues such as perceived automation, speed, and the absence of human intervention, as well as on experiences of personalisation, targeted advertising, and differentiated search or platform results. A smaller group demonstrates a more structural understanding,

associating algorithms with large-scale data processing and multi-criteria decision-making, while others adopt a critical stance, raising concerns about transparency, bias, and accountability, particularly in public decision-making contexts. Some respondents also describe investigative strategies, such as comparing search results or questioning decision-making processes, indicating emerging critical digital literacy practices. Overall, while the concept of an algorithm is generally understood at an abstract level, identifying it in everyday situations remains difficult. References tend to focus on widely used applications rather than on specific public sector examples.

Daily work and audiences

Algorithm-related concerns are not yet a frequent topic of interaction between citizens and digital mediators. A majority of respondents reported either never receiving inquiries from their audience regarding algorithms (28), or receiving them very rarely, approximately once every three months (24). As one participant stated: “No specific questions. Algorithms are mentioned as part of the complex and hard-to-understand digital world.” Another noted: “To be honest, I have (almost) never talked about algorithms with my target group.” Interviews also indicate that the term *algorithm* remains highly ambiguous, and that questions raised by the public are often driven by fear and uncertainty rather than by technical curiosity. Digital mediators reported in interviews that they noticed an increase in questions from their audience following the introduction of the Meta blue circular icon in the WhatsApp feed.

A smaller group of respondents indicated experiencing occasional algorithm-related questions from their audience, about once per month (14), and only 8 respondents reported receiving such questions regularly, at least twice per month. When these discussions do take place, conversations occur face-to-face (51), particularly within digital inclusion or public service contexts such as workshops. These conversations also take place through informal exchanges. Moreover, these discussions are often initiated by professionals rather than by their public, pointing out that algorithm-related concerns are not yet a frequent or spontaneous topic in everyday citizen interactions. When raised, these questions are also formulated through emails (6) and phone calls (4). These results show that non-digital access points remain important in Belgium, as they continue to provide ways for citizens to ask questions and engage with these issues.

Algorithm-related questions fall into three main categories. A first theme pertains to the use and functioning of algorithms, with citizens asking: “What are algorithms and how do they work?”, “What are they used for?”, or “What is their purpose?” These questions indicate a need for basic clarification about what algorithms are and what they do.

A second group of questions relates to the impact of algorithms, particularly in terms of security and privacy. Respondents report concerns such as: “Is it dangerous in terms of security?”, “How can they put our privacy at risk?” In this context, algorithms are perceived through the lens of potential risks and threats to personal data especially among individuals aged 65 and over. A third category relates to the possibility of

avoiding or resisting algorithms, illustrated by questions such as: “Can we escape them? And how?” and “Can we protect ourselves against them?” These responses suggest a desire not only to understand algorithmic systems but also to regain a sense of choice and control over their effects.

Resources and support

In response to the question “What questions do you have about algorithms?”, the answers from digital mediators show a shift from basic definition, functional concerns toward normative and societal questions. Beyond seeking to understand how to identify or explain algorithmic decision-making, respondents raise concerns about fairness, neutrality, and the potential discriminatory effects of data-driven systems: *“How can I know whether an algorithm has made a decision about me? Is the algorithm fair and neutral?”* Several responses question the broader societal implications of algorithms, including their impact on democracy, community dynamics, and cognitive autonomy, as well as the risk that increasing reliance on AI may weaken critical thinking. Issues of accountability and governance also emerge, with respondents asking who bears responsibility in cases of error or discrimination and whether stronger legislative requirements for algorithmic transparency should be imposed on both public and private organisations: *“Can an algorithm be hacked? Does looking into the black box help? Who protects our rights (EU, Belgian government, FARI)?”, “What should we know about algorithms? Especially regarding impact on life, privacy, media use, harmful consequences. Where can transparent information be found?”, “Who is responsible in case of error or discrimination caused by an algorithm?”.*

Few respondents are aware of citizens’ rights in the context of algorithmic decision-making. Only 5 participants answered affirmatively, while 25 indicated that they were unsure and 47 reported that they don’t know how to support their audience in exercising their rights should they disagree with an automated decision made by an algorithm. Among the respondents who answered positively, several forms of recourse were mentioned, including filing a complaint, adjusting privacy settings, invoking rights under the GDPR, or logging an appeal with the Data Protection Authority (APD). Some also referred to contacting the relevant organisation or public authority directly in order to speak with a human representative. One respondent noted that their audience is unlikely to take action, even when guidance on how to exercise their rights is available.

These findings suggest a gap between perceived and actual capacity to support citizens in exercising their rights. While very few respondents believe they would be able to guide individuals through relevant procedures, only one demonstrates concrete knowledge of how to exercise these rights and to which authority. This indicates that confidence in providing support does not necessarily correspond to a clear understanding of how those rights can effectively be exercised in practice.

[The Netherlands: context]

In recent years, government services in the Netherlands have increasingly been digitised. The Dutch government is now [one of the most digitised in Europe](#), including various automated decision-making and risk detection technologies. The Dutch childcare benefits scandal (in Dutch: Toeslagenaffaire) is the most significant scandal of risk detection in the Netherlands. Since 2013, [the government has used an algorithmic system](#) to identify families at high risk of committing fraud by unduly requesting child care subsidies. The use of this system resulted in thousands of families being incorrectly labelled as fraudsters, forcing many families to repay large sums of money, sometimes up to 150.000 euros. The scandal became a watershed moment for the Dutch government to improve algorithmic transparency.

Algorithmic transparency is an important principle in Dutch administrative law. Government decisions must be clearly explained so that citizens understand why a decision was taken. This is known as the principle of motivation. If an algorithm played a role in a decision, the government must inform citizens about its use. However, transparency in practice remains limited. In 2021, [the Netherlands Court of Audit](#) reported that the central government does not properly supervise the quality and risks of its algorithms. According to the report, many government organisations lack an overview of all algorithms they use as well as knowledge of whether these systems function correctly. The report also stated that citizens have inadequate means to access or request information, report errors, or file complaints and challenge decisions on the use of algorithms.

To improve transparency, the Netherlands introduced in 2022 [a national algorithm transparency register](#). Public authorities can publish information about the algorithms they use, including their purpose, risk assessments and contact details. However, publishing full information is still voluntary. An analysis by the Open State Foundation showed that by the end of 2024 the register contained 610 algorithms. This number represents only about two percent of the estimated 16.000 algorithms used across government organisations, meaning that the register currently provides only limited insight (note: there were 1400 algorithms published in March 2026).

Next to initiatives fostering algorithmic transparency, Dutch public institutions like libraries, as well as independent social organisations, provide digital literacy programs for citizens. These are usually broad in scope and address the use of digital government services, as well as topics such as online safety. Algorithmic literacy programs for citizens are not yet part of these offerings but there is interest to develop literacy programs for inclusion workers and citizens regarding consumer facing algorithms.

[The Netherlands: analysis]

Overview of stakeholders' knowledge legitimacy, expertise, knowledge

When asked to describe an algorithm in their own words, 23 out of 24 Dutch respondents could provide examples, often using comparisons such as a script, recipe, pattern, series or set of rules. Typical descriptions included “a series of instructions for a computer to perform a task or solve a problem”, or “a mathematical description of a sequence of actions, for example, a recipe for baking a cake.”

23 out of 24 respondents mentioned a wide range of algorithmic applications in daily life, mainly regarding personalised recommendations and important everyday services. This includes automated advertisement placements, search results, social-media feeds, route planning, or streaming suggestions, typically connected to everyday smartphone and internet use. Some respondents also referred to formal decision-making contexts such as banking checks, tax inspections, or healthcare applications. The term “algorithm” therefore evokes both consumer systems as well as services with important social consequences.

Algorithms associated with public services are predominantly linked to monitoring and law enforcement, including tax and benefits checks, fraud detection and debt signalling. Here, 21 out of 24 respondents said that they can think of an algorithm. Regarding citizen-facing services, only a small number were mentioned, such as chatbots and translation tools. 3 respondents referred to private-sector technologies, for example, social-media platforms, general AI tools such as ChatGPT and supermarket self-scanning. This suggests that distinctions between public and private algorithmic systems are not always clearly made by our respondents.

When asked how our respondents recognise algorithms as part of the problems and questions that citizens share with them in consultations, responses were varied. On the one hand, several respondents assume algorithms to be involved whenever citizens use a digital service. These respondents equate digital services with algorithms. If citizens use services such as filing online government forms, these respondents assume that an algorithm is involved in processing their information. If citizens mention a website, app, or automated messaging as part of their question our respondents are led to conclude that an algorithm likely played a role in processing information.

On the other hand, respondents emphasised that it is very difficult if not impossible to determine whether an algorithm has been used and that no clear method exists. Some stated they had “*no idea*” or that it “*does not seem possible*” to identify algorithms, while

others said it can only be demonstrated when it is “*very obvious*”. For instance, one respondent argued that they might assume that a decision was automated if it contradicts what this respondent knows about the citizen’s situation and profile. While such contradictions may raise suspicion, the respondent acknowledges that this does not constitute proof that a citizen was subject to algorithmic decision-making.

A small number of respondents reported contacting the responsible organisation, for example, the sender of an official letter. They may reconstruct the customer journey or verify procedures with the relevant authority. In these cases, respondents use knowledge about organisational processes to understand decision-making processes. This shows significant differences in how our respondents understand and respond to questions and problems faced by citizens regarding algorithms.

Daily work and audiences

Similar to the other two countries surveyed, algorithms are not a frequent topic of interaction between citizens and our respondents. The majority of Dutch respondents (18 out of 24) argued that citizens never ask about algorithms or that they have no direct contact with citizens. When questions do occur (6), they usually concern how algorithms work, as well as topics of privacy, security, and discrimination.

Interviews we conducted in addition to the survey show that citizens have three kinds of questions regarding algorithms. The first set of questions concerns “the algorithm” and “AI” as general topics, without reference to a concrete situation in which they are being used. Interviewees working at public libraries and information desks for digital government services increasingly receive questions from visitors asking about AI. These visitors ask questions such as : What is AI? What can you do with ChatGPT? An interviewee working at the Rotterdam Library argued that “People want to know more about it, partly because of frequent news coverage.” Current attention to AI is one reason why citizens ask questions about it.

The second set of questions revolves around concrete problems with digital technology. Here, the algorithm itself is not the main topic of discussion. Instead, citizens raise questions regarding problematic situations. According to staff at the Rotterdam Library, algorithms are rarely a question in themselves but emerge as part of other contexts, such as in discussions around fake news, online recommendations and why people get to see them, or internet safety.

A third set of questions revolves around concrete information requests about algorithms and data processing. According to interviewees working at the Dutch Data Protection Authority, citizens submit questions and complaints through access requests to different contact points (the authority itself, ombudspersons, complaint desks, and social justice lawyers). These citizens typically ask which of their personal data is

processed by a particular algorithm. However, these requests are still rare and citizens often receive standardised replies containing only general information on algorithmic processing being done, but not how it is applied to their situation.

This means that in the Netherlands, citizens raise different questions regarding algorithms and AI to different organisations helping them. A digital inclusion expert and an ombudsman told us that it is still unclear what their roles should be to answer these questions, and to whom citizens could turn to receive help. For these interviewees, a process to send citizens to the right organisation able to answer their questions would be beneficial, but not in place yet.

Resources and support

In response to the question “What questions do you have about algorithms?”, digital mediators report particular interest in how algorithms work and which organisations are responsible for them. In addition, people are concerned about privacy and data use, for example, whether personal information could be misused and whether individuals can opt out.

Accountability and oversight are also key. Some respondents want to know who is responsible and how the government maintains control over these systems, indicating that civil servants have low knowledge about ethical risks of algorithms too.

Only a few respondents have questions about the practical application of algorithms.

A significant knowledge gap of our respondents concerns the lack of knowledge about citizens’ rights regarding algorithms. 20 out of 24 respondents stated that they are not sure how citizens can exercise their rights if they disagree with a decision made by an algorithm. Our interviews with digital inclusion experts show that digital inclusion professionals have insufficient understanding to properly explain how algorithms work and the processes in which they are embedded.

There is an interest within these organisations to understand what AI is, how it can be used responsibly, what the risks are, and what critical questions they should ask. Also within government organisations using algorithms, there are no clear ways to provide citizens with sufficiently useful answers to their questions. Interviewees at the Dutch Data Protection Agency informed us that they develop example documents and templates for publishing information about algorithms. Overall, there is still a need for digital inclusion professionals and those using algorithms to the use of algorithms, their impacts, and to enhance critical and ethical reflection on its use.

Opening

The results of our survey of digital mediators, as well as interviews with inclusion professionals, show that there is no widespread, shared understanding of what an algorithm is, how it works, or its impacts—even among those who believe they have a good grasp of these concepts. Digital inclusion professionals also lack reliable, established resources they can turn to when addressing the questions and needs of their audience. Another observation is that this lack of knowledge bases is compounded by limited—or even non-existent—transparency regarding the algorithms.

Furthermore, this transparency often takes the form of publishing a flowchart of the algorithm, the computer code, or even a description that does not necessarily go into great detail. However, this is not enough to make the algorithm's operation understandable, a question that citizens frequently raise.

In addition, the interviews show that collective learning processes help identify when algorithms are used at a systemic level. Also, participants indicate the importance of group settings where people can learn together, exchange views across different digital practices and experiences, and reflect collectively rather than relying only on individual context alone.

Trends for our future work

All of this work led us to ask the following question : How can we design a tool that meets the needs of professionals in the fields of digital inclusion and facilitation while incorporating this collaborative dimension ? A tool that can be easily enhanced and updated to keep pace with technological advancements and evolutions of use by the citizens ?

While Algo->Lit is not designed to produce content, the project nevertheless aims to identify high-quality, up-to-date resources and provide a method for integrating them into this tool, which will be made available to digital facilitators.

As we - Dataactivist, Waag, Fari and MedNum - worked together on designing this tool, we identified new issues that have arisen, particularly regarding the maintenance, the moderation and updating of the tool. Indeed, who should and could be responsible for this in each partner country once the Erasmus+ AlgoLit project has ended ? How does this tool address the issue of algorithmic transparency while two countries lack an official national registry of algorithms?

Our discussion also broadens to consider what approach we can take to develop a transnational/European strategy that makes algorithmic transparency a political issue to be addressed in depth. What European strategy should be adopted to promote research on algorithmic transparency?

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