

INVESTIGATING AMAZON ALGORITHMS

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CONTEXT OF MY STORY

- Written as part of a the Digital Rights Programme for Journalists organized by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network for journalists from CEE and the Western Balkans
- Focusing on Amazon algorithms in Czech and Polish warehouses
 - Booming logistics sector in the region, which often serves as a cheap „warehouse“ for Germany
 - Amazon a relatively easy case, because its algorithms have already been investigated by journalists in the US

FINDINGS OF MY STORY I

- In Amazon warehouses, people are guided and evaluated by an algorithmic system, based on data previously collected about their movement and pace
- This algorithmic management system is proprietary and used in all Amazon warehouses. It is not intelligible to the workers
- If you fail to meet the norms you get a warning and a coaching, you are fired after 3 warnings
- Positions in Amazon differ, what is measured by the system as well -> your manager can send you to a different position as a reward or punishment, human factor still important

FINDINGS OF MY STORY 2

- It is extremely important to enforce already existing legislation
 - According to GDPR, Amazon is not allowed to collect personal data of workers the way it does. Workers' consent should not be enough as a justification
 - Local labor codes also usually stipulate for which reasons workers can be fired
- The Polish courts deemed Amazon terminating an employee to be illegal, saying the automated system does show which results the employees should have in order to be “safe“
- This case shows the importance of trade unions for law enforcement
- Unfortunately, workers usually don't know their rights

WRITING THE STORY

- Very difficult to investigate internal processes of companies in general
- The evaluation system is a trade secret, the company representatives gave only general statements, they did not meet with me for the story nor responded at most of my questions
- There is no public data I could investigate
- My sole sources were current and former employees
- I did not learn any „new techniques“
- Disbalance between public authorities and big tech in transparency obligations

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Algorithms are becoming a norm in other companies in logistics as well -> this has to be investigated further
- Enforcement + education about rights crucial, new legislation will not suffice otherwise
- In the current EU proposal on AI regulation, workers management by AI is considered high risk (ex-ante and periodical risk assessment required)
- Low confidence seeing how GDPR is enforced

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!



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