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Not Everyone Can be Seen: Algorithmic Power in Digital Publishing

Introduction

Nowadays, with the rapid development of digital media technology, it seems that everyone can become a creator. The development of short video platforms has significantly lowered the threshold for content creation. Only a smartphone can complete many professional editing or publishing institution works; these technologies are easily mastered by "ordinary users". Society has a great image for this trend: cultural production is becoming open, and knowledge is constructed by the general public, and is no longer controlled by a few elites. However, if our vision from "being able to create" transfers to "can be able to seen", a completely different reality began to emerge. Although everyone can upload content, not everyone's content has seen the opportunity to be disseminated, to be focused, and to be shaped into "voice in the public sense". Whether content is seen or not no longer depends on the creators, and no longer depends on viewer choices, but it is decided by the platform's algorithm, which increasingly acts as a cultural gatekeeper (Gillespie, 2014). People often think they are actively choosing content, but in reality, they see much content, is from algorithmic statistics. The platform's algorithm according our the duration of stay, interactive behavior, and viewing habits to decides what extent to which each content can come into the public eye. Under this mechanism, we entered a new era of editing: Algorithm becomes a new cultural editor, but creators' power is under the algorithm (Striphas, 2015). Therefore, in the digital era core problem is not "who can create?", actually is "who can be seen?" This essay will analyze from both theoretical and practical perspectives: when algorithms take on the role of cultural editors, how does the digital publishing's structure change? And how platform create new inequality under the name of "openness"? In this environment, How does the structure of digital publishing change when algorithms take on the role of cultural editors? How do platforms create new inequalities in the name of "openness"? In such an environment,

what responsibilities should editors, platforms, and users of the digital age bear? In the digital era, what responsibility should editors, platforms and users assume? The core goal of this essay is to propose a reflective perspective: technology does not automatically bring more equality cultural ecosystem; instead, it may in an invisible level it strengthen the centralization of power (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Keywords: Algorithmic power, Digital cultural production, Digital publishing, Content visibility, Platformization, Editorial responsibility, Participatory culture

1. Theoretical background: participatory culture's promise and the reality of platformization.

1.1 The open imagination of participatory culture: the role of creator change.

In the Web 2.0 era, participatory culture is the most transformative force on the Internet, as platforms were designed around user contribution and co-creation (O'Reilly, 2005). An online platform enables users can freely upload content, and the user's identity from content customers transfers to content producer, collaborator, and disseminator. Participatory culture constructs a beautiful vision – culture production is no longer a monopoly by institutions, and it is completed by the public. Now, the audiences have gained the ability to participate actively and have become important roles in the push cultural flow.

However, in a participatory culture, the implicit premise is that all creators have equal rights in the dissemination. In theory, everyone can through their own expression ability enter the public area, and obtain equal visibility. But reflecting this premise, we can find that it ignores a key issue: whether creators have equal opportunity to dissemination, and whether the dissemination space of content is really equal (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Participatory culture changes the "right to create", but it does not change the "right to dissemination." In reality, the dissemination opportunity is not equally distributed by theoretical imagination; instead, they are deeply controlled by platform mechanisms.

1.2 Re-centralization in the platformization era: freely creating does not mean freely disseminating.

With the platform becoming the basic structure of digital culture, the internet's right distribution has undergone some change. Although creation seems to be decentralized, dissemination has become re-centralized. Platforms through control data, design algorithms, and formulate content rules have established a new cultural distribution system. This platform-driven logic is described as "platformization," where distribution becomes increasingly shaped by corporate infrastructures. Platforms are not just

passively carrying cultural tools; on the contrary, they have their own rules, algorithms, and screening logic, and not all content will be presented equally. It decides what content users can see, what they miss, what they consider important, and what unimportant content can be ignored. Which means that the platform provides create space, and also limits the visibility boundaries. Under this structure, creators can now more easily express themselves, but the platform's system limits the content dissemination.

This re-centralization logic is a platform just can through an algorithm to control users' stay time, and keep users on the platform as much as possible. Therefore, platforms don't care about content's cultural meaning; they just focus on whether content has the potential to be widely spread. This logic deeply weakens the openness of participatory culture (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

1.3 Algorithm culture: how does data logic become a new cultural logic?

When a platform transfers cultural communication to algorithmic processing, cultural logic has been replaced by algorithmic logic. Algorithmic don't understand the cultural context, they just understand the digital index, such as:

- Users stay time
- The number of likes, comments, and shares
- Fully play rate
- Whether this short video uses popular music

This shift illustrates what scholars call “algorithmic culture”—a condition in which computational systems shape how culture circulates and is valued (Strieths, 2015). The algorithm just implements a cultural value system of efficiency first, and the content has interactive potential; the algorithm will push it. If the content does not conform to the interaction potential, no matter how high-quality, it will not be seen. Therefore, an algorithm becomes a selector of culture, rather than an understanding of culture. They decided what content can be seen, but cannot be responsible for culture.

2. The algorithm visibility system of TikTok: how does algorithmic become a new editor?

Nowadays, TikTok is the most representative algorithm-driven platform, especially the “For You Page”(FYP) system has almost decided what content users can see, as several studies have observed its central role in content distribution (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). It's so different than traditional editing, the algorithm just pays attention to

whether the content can attract users to stay time or interaction. Therefore, FYP actually assumes the role of an "editor", it adjusts visibility invisibly in the background, and is responsible for who can be seen, who can be ignored, enabling the platform to hold a huge editing power (Gillespie, 2018).

2.1 Algorithm as an editor: from selecting content to deciding culture

In TikTok, the platform doesn't depend on human editors to select content, but through an algorithm calculates its spread space. The algorithm calculates logic that relies on users' behavior data, rather than a judgment culture. It focuses on whether the content is good-looking, whether the creator can quickly trigger a reaction, rather than whether it has societal value or whether worth discussing. TikTok's algorithm is designed to optimise engagement rather than cultural meaning (Felaco, 2025).

Therefore, TikTok's recommendation mechanism actually uses a set of rules to select content, weakening or stripping away the content's cultural background and regional characteristics, and only cares about whether it can attract more people.

The evaluation criteria transfer from culture to the number of interactions, from the dissemination meaning to the stay time, and also the creator is not freely expressing, but rather based on algorithmic preferences to create content (Bucher, 2018).

This means that the content's visibility has been compressed into a single level: whether it can attract short-term attention. And this is precisely where the fundamental power of algorithms lies.

2.2 The algorithm quietly determines how the creator should express themselves.

In TikTok's content ecology, creators are not completely free. With the accumulation of creative experience, they will gradually find out which strategies can be exposed on the platform, such as using popular music, following the trend of popular editing mode, or strengthening visual stimulation to attract users' attention. These expression strategies are not the choice of the creators themselves, but the result of constant feedback from the platform algorithm. As Zulli (2020) said, the platform is actively encouraging "template creation" and pushing creators to follow preset formats to increase visibility.

In order to get more attention, creators will constantly adjust their creative forms according to their algorithm preferences, and even give up their original expression style. Influenced by this rule for a long time, the creator has gradually changed from a free expression to a "content worker" of the algorithm. The algorithm not only determines which content can be seen, but also shapes the production logic of content: creation becomes more like an assembly module, which can be copied in

batches, and cultural expression becomes driven by platform preferences. In this process, the algorithm actually controls the front end of the creation and weakens the cultural discourse right of the creator (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

2.3 The algorithm is opaque

The recommendation algorithms of many platforms are very opaque. Creators can't know why their works are restricted, why a work suddenly becomes popular without any hint, or why someone keeps making great content but no one notices it. These phenomena can't be understood or explained clearly, which makes this system not only confuse the creators, but also slowly change the cultural environment of the whole platform. It is found that this opacity is the inherent feature of TikTok management (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

The recommendation system runs in an opaque environment, which makes it impossible for creators to judge the visibility of their content, and they don't know how to change it, and they can't be sure what will happen next time. In fact, this opaque algorithm system forms a new concentration of cultural power, which deeply affects the production and dissemination of digital content in the absence of transparency and open discussion. The opacity of the platform gives the platform too much power to control which cultural content is seen (Cotter, 2019).

3. Discussion of inequality in digital publishing and editors' responsibility in the future.

3.1 Inequality of content visibility: platforms can decide who can be seen.

When algorithms play an editor role in digital publishing, the content visibility no longer depends on the creators' expressed intention and the cultural value of the content itself. It depends on platforms on how to redistribute public attention through data logic. Although creation becomes more democratic, everyone can freely publish content, the dissemination process becomes more centralized, a pattern also identified in recent platform studies. The platform can depend on algorithmic preference to decide who can be seen, which means there is a gap between everyone can speak, but not everyone can be seen. On the surface, each creator seems to have an equal opportunity to enter public views, but in reality, the platform uses an algorithm to decide the dissemination, making content visibility not depend on its cultural meaning, but more dependent on whether it meets the operational goals of the platform. In this way, digital publishing presents a state of looking openness, but in fact unequal. Platform algorithms largely affected the cultural expression scope, and also affected what can be seen and what can be discussed (Gillespie, 2018).

3.2 Algorithm preference affects content visibility, making multi-expression have been weakened.

The platforms' recommendation algorithm often has obvious preferences; they like to push more fast, exciting, and interactive content, and this preference does not come from culture itself, but it is shaped by the platform's pursuit of users' stay time and traffic. Therefore, creators' visibility largely depends on whether the content accords with the algorithm logic of platforms, not the content's diversity or cultural value. In contrast, that content is slow-paced, does not conform to the mainstream template, or needs more patience to be watched, is more likely to be ignored by algorithms; thus, this content being in a disadvantage position at the dissemination level. Research on algorithmic bias has repeatedly shown that recommendation systems tend to amplify certain dominant forms while marginalizing others (Noble, 2018).

With the recommendation system continuously strengthening this preference, the platform gradually forms a seemingly natural but actually highly structured content ecology. The mainstream expression is constantly amplified, and the diverse voices are marginalized. Over time, the users can access a type of content that will become more and more limited, and cultural diversity is constantly compressed in the algorithm mechanism (Bucher, 2018).

3.3 The labor of digital creators becomes the platform's capital

In the digital platform, the creators' all behaviors continuously provide data to the platform, such as taking videos, editing to interaction, and content updates. These data are not only used for recommendation decisions, in contrast it will training and strengthening the platform's algorithm, which enables the platform through algorithms hold the way of cultural content dissemination, and also hold the way of making money with content. On the surface, creators can freely participate in the platform ecology, but in reality, their content and labor are absorbed by the platform as commercial capital, while the creators' returns are lower than their labor investment. This asymmetry reflects a broader dynamic that scholars call "digital labor exploitation" (Terranova, 2000).

The creators work harder to produce content, it will have more power to promote the algorithm of platform to become stronger, and let the platform gain more user data, and further increase the control rights of the platform over creators. In this new labor relationship, the platform obtains many values of content through a control algorithm and distributes traffic. Although the creator is a content producer, they cannot participate in the value distribution mechanism of the platform (Lanier, 2013).

3.4 The editors' role and responsibility

In the era of algorithm-dominant content distribution, the role of editing has not been weakened, but has become more important. Nowadays, editing is not just a process of text or adjusting the content structure; rather, it is necessary to supervise the impact of algorithms on cultural ecology. They need to pay attention to which content can be prioritized by the algorithm, which voice can be ignored, and which group is at the edge position due to platform logic. Meanwhile, editors also need to take the initiative to question in dissemination standards by platform, promote the presentation of cultural diversity, and participate in public discussions about algorithm bias.

In addition, platforms themselves should also assume necessary social responsibilities, improve algorithm transparency, and make corrections to the content suppression that vulnerable groups may suffer. Meanwhile, users also need to improve algorithmic literacy and realize that the platform's information is not an objective presentation; this content is the result of after algorithm screening, rather than all the cultural landscapes. As scholars argue, digital literacy and accountability are indispensable if we hope to counteract algorithmic power (Noble, 2018).

4. Conclusion

In the digital environment, everyone can create already become a universal reality, but the expansion of freely creating does not equal the realization of freely disseminating. The platform structure of the algorithm dominates, enabling the threshold for expression has be lowered, but also making the threshold for visibility has be improved. This further widens the gap between everyone can speak, and everyone can be seen. Whether the content enters the public eye no longer depends on its cultural value or expressive strength, but it depends on platforms' algorithm logic, reflecting how digital infrastructures shape visibility and influence public knowledge.

Therefore, the real openness in the digital era not only pays attention to the popularization of creative tools, but also pays more attention to the distribution of disseminated opportunities. Openness is not enable more people can speak, rather it enables different voices to have seem possibility of being seen. To achieve this, technology alone is not enough; the platform needs to improve algorithm transparency, editors need to rethink their own position in digital culture, and users need to realize that the content I see is only part of the information selected by the platform.

If we cannot seriously face these issues, then even if everyone has creative ability, we still just see a limited part of selected by algorithms, not the real world. Digital public space cannot depend on algorithms; it needs advanced technology, institutional

constraints, and user participation in joint maintenance to enable digital culture to continue being developed in a diverse, open, and equal environment.

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