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Computing, Society, and Professionalism

6 September 2023

Homework 2: Politics of Artifacts

Social media recommendation systems are algorithms employed by social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to suggest personalized content to users. These algorithms use user data such as profile information, likes, comments, and shares to build a profile of the user, which is used to suggest certain types of content to them via their feed. In this way, the users create a feedback loop where their interaction with their suggested posts and videos become input for their personalization algorithms, which continue to give them more personalized suggestions [1]. In line with these technologies, the motivating factor behind these algorithms is to provide the users with a more personalized experience, so that users continue to use the app and interact with media. A large part of this is also due to the drive for profit [3]. The more users interact with their app, the more profit is generated for the companies behind them. These are a few examples of the values and politics behind social media recommendation systems.

As such, some of these characteristics can be classified as intentional implications of the platforms. Since the motivation behind these companies is to increase their profit, it is clear that the goal of these recommendation algorithms is to increase their user retention and engagement. Furthermore, the monetization of content is another intentional feature. To make money, these companies need some way of generating revenue. So, by suggesting advertisements to users, these platforms can generate ad revenue. In addition to this, by showing advertisements to users whose profile suggests they would be likely to purchase that product, these platforms can market their advertisements as more effective than other advertisement platforms.

Some of the unintentional characteristics of social media platforms include the formation of filter bubbles and extremism. By recommending users content that aligns with their likes and interactions, users end up getting a lot more recommendations for that topic. For instance, regarding politics, if a person is more left-wing, then they will tend to receive more left-winged oriented media on their feed. Since they are continuously receiving media that confirms their political views, they may tend to believe their views are correct and grow unwilling to listen to alternative views [1]. Similar statements can be made about other topics as well, but politics is a more notorious example. However, no matter what the topic is about, people tend to become more polarized and isolated into their own beliefs because of these social media recommendation algorithms. Another unintentional implication of these systems worth mentioning is privacy concerns. With more data to work with, algorithms have more data points to base their recommendations off and tend to make more accurate recommendations [2]. As such, companies have been increasingly concerned with collecting more data from their users, which can lead to privacy concerns.

Finally, there are also specialized implications of these systems on marginalized communities. For instance, these recommendation systems can help spread the voices and messages of marginalized groups, spreading awareness. In this way, a shared community can be formed, making it very accessible for people to join. However, on the other hand, they can also make them a target of harassment [3]. Additionally, in these contexts, it is also important to remember the existence of biases in these algorithms. So, some groups may still be ignored.

Overall, there are many different sides to the issue of social media recommendations systems. These systems have several intentional implications behind them, such as personalized content recommendations, data collection, and advertisement generation, but also many unintentional implications as well, such as polarization in one’s beliefs. Furthermore, these systems can impact marginalized communities as well. Such systems have become widespread in recent years and will only continue to gain more popularity with the rise of Large Language Models such as ChatGPT.

Works Referenced

[1] R. W. Maloy, T. Trust, A. Butler, and C. Xu, “Recommendation Algorithms on Social Media Platforms,” Critical Media Literacy and Civic Learning, https://edtechbooks.org/mediaandciviclearning/recommendation\_algorithms (accessed Aug. 29, 2023).

[2] A. Narayanan, “Understanding Social Media Recommendation Algorithms,” Knight First Amendment Institute, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/understanding-social-media-recommendation-algorithms#:~:text=In%20the%20algorithmic%20model%20shown,to%20be%20recommended%20the%20post. (accessed Aug. 29, 2023).

[3] Wikipedia, “Recommender System,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recommender\_system (accessed Aug. 29, 2023).