

The Shaping of Social Media Algorithms on User Behavior

Subjects: **Social Issues**

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Social media has thus become an integral part of daily life for over two billion people all over the world. Social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok remain at the center of our interactions, information, entertainment, and connections. This widespread adoption is strongly attributed to content curation and delivery through complex algorithms that lie beneath the surface of each platform. These algorithms decide the content users are exposed to and self-learn from the interactions of the users on large volumes of data. Such a system of personalization has transformed how users engage with these platforms and facilitated the growth of social media platforms. However, the impact of these algorithms has only started to unveil how deeply they influence society. We must enhance this knowledge to fully appreciate the role of social media in society. This covers how algorithms inform users' information diet, interaction patterns, purchase choices and even well-being.

Social Media

Algorithms

User Behavior

Content Curation

Engagement Metrics

Mental Health

Misinformation

1. Understanding Social Media Algorithms

Social media relies on an algorithm to determine what feed of content each user will receive. These are a set of coded software instructions that are used to evaluate inputs in order to come up with the best outputs. The inputs include the content to be posted, information on users' preferences and activity, advertiser requirements and platform goals on social media. The output is the feed of content that each user receives in real time.

Different priority settings are based on various algorithmic approaches used by various platforms. Facebook wants users to have 'meaningful social interaction' with friends and families. TikTok's assertive algorithms promptly seek to understand users' interests and provide them with captivating videos. YouTube must control suggestions to assist content providers in reaching customers to ensure people remain interested in the videos.

Regardless of the strategy used, the companies protect the operations of their algorithms from the public to avoid revealing their advantages. However, there is one similarity, which is the desire to increase the user's engagement, as the calculated stimuli are intended to attract the viewers' attention.

2. Influence on User Behavior

Catapulted by powerful algorithms, social media has begun transforming user behaviour in profound ways across two key areas:

Content Consumption

Feeds offer content that is likely to appeal to each user and encourage interaction through likes, shares and comments. Users are more inclined to engage with posts that are emotional, provocative, and those espousing their own beliefs.

In the long run, users become entrenched in filter bubbles and echo chambers. That is, they only get information from sources with similar political leanings, thus promulgating particular stories. This weak point of the leverage algorithms has on the user worldviews has negative social implications.

Engagement Patterns

The fact that the algorithms for curation allow for individualization in recommendations has revolutionized the ways in which users engage with content. Where social interactions were once a government statistic, today's consumers in the US, for instance, spend nearly three hours on social media daily, and open platforms more than 200 times a week. The race created by the algorithms for engagement results in designs that are deliberately made to increase the daily visits of the user and its addictive intrinsic rewards with notifications, validation and feedback in the form of quantifiable likes and shares.

3. Implications for Users

Although algorithm developers have realistic business incentives to improve attention, it is crucial to grasp a comprehensive understanding of how these technologies affect people. Emerging research on two troubling correlated trends gives reason for caution:

Mental Health Effects

Given that social media is integrated into identity, self-esteem, and social recognition for an entire generation, scholars have started to worry about the effects on psychological well-being. Research finds that there are relationships where excessive social media use resulting from engagement-enhancing algorithms results in increasing concerns such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts among teenagers.

The algorithm researchers of Facebook referred to a study in 2017 that included a study by sociologist Holly B. Shakya on the effects of social media that showed that the users interacting less offline and having higher depression markers predicted a later actual self-reported depression in the users. The researchers alerted that the platform's algorithms which were performing the same function of providing users full immersion could be inadvertently encouraging social disconnection and long-term negative effects.

Misinformation and Distrust

This is where the same algorithms that are used to facilitate platform growth dictate what information users interact with, forming global perspectives with significant social implications. Anger spreads at a much faster rate than facts when it comes to social networking. There were shocking instances of viral misinformation starting from political propaganda to stretching the global pandemic beyond health restrictions.

Hence, because platform use is social, users have a high implicit reliance on the information feeds curated by friends and influencers. However, radicalization of opinions appears within algorithm-driven bubbles and chambers regardless of the truth of the information presented. It means that a large majority of users themselves cannot identify misinformation. This disguises how algorithmic boosting of desired posts undermines the common ground on which democracies rely.

4. Conclusion

Our study has just scratched the surface of a rich interplay between highly effective social media's automatic signals designed for interactional gain and fragile members of society. As billions now rely on platforms to provide unbiased reportage of daily information, knowing how these technological guards influence thought and actions is crucial.

In this context, it would be naïve to believe that these companies, dependent on the sales of attention, would be able to regulate these algorithms that are proven damaging, solely for ethical purposes. For the greater good to be protected, there is a need for new legislation to enhance the protection of whistleblowers and funding for independent research by social scientists. Solutions provide the ability to regulate the inputs introduced by algorithms to users while at the same time enhancing the algorithms' transparency to society. If the goals of social media are not properly aligned, this technology becomes a tool that fosters the worst aspects of anti-social objectives that are not aligned with the common good of health, truth, and democracy.

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