TIKTOK AND THE "ALGORITHMIZED SELF": A NEW MODEL OF ONLINE INTERACTION

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Introduction

Having been downloaded over 1.5 billion times worldwide since its release in 2017, there is little doubt that one of the fastest growing social media platforms today is TikTok. Centred around video sharing, TikTok allows users to create music and lip-sync videos of 2 to 15 seconds, and looping videos of 2 to 60 seconds (Williams, 2020).

Despite TikTok's ever-increasing popularity, it has been the topic of little academic analysis. This project was primarily motivated by a desire to understand TikTok's meteoric rise in use; is it simply the latest iteration of a social networking model that is found in other popular applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter? Or, does it owe its success in part to a novel interaction structure?

To further elucidate this research question, we established a theoretical framework grounded in Science and Technology Studies and Communication. In these fields, work in the analysis of social media is often grounded in theories of the "self," and has examined the manner in which Social Networking Sites (SNSs) constitute sites of self-presentation and identity management (Papacharissi, 2011). Traditional SNSs represent, underline, and intensify real world social interactions and transform them into digital equivalents. These sites are meant to provide a stage for social interaction, and guide users through this experience via certain affordances and design features: for example, users are encouraged to connect to potential friends, like, comment on, or

share posts, and view other member's profiles (boyd, 2010). In this way, SNSs are projects in managing sociality and negotiating self-expression through these social ties: one self-represents by engaging with one's network within the context of the SNS.

In this model of sociality, the SNSs provide a stage for users to engage in these processes of identity management and representation. Interaction and curation are ostensibly self-directed; despite the growing prevalence of algorithmically directed feeds, these sites at least claim that they provide a space for free self-representation (Van Dijck, 2013). While this process involves close interaction between humans and technology, the technology is intended to be mainly a tool or extension of the user's will; the "machine" holds little life of its own.

Methods

In this project, we examine the degree to which TikTok exemplifies this "common mode" of social media use. In order to illuminate the particular methods and mechanisms of self-representation offered by TikTok, we used the walkthrough method as described by Light et al. (2018). This method, grounded in Actor Network Theory, involves the systematic collection of data throughout various steps of app registration and entry, everyday use, and discontinuation of use in order to analyse an app in its entirety.

In accordance with this method, our data collection process comprised of two distinct stages. First, the environment of expected use was established by examining the app store descriptions, white papers, and newsroom documents put forward by the app from its launch until February 2020. This was taken in conjunction with narratives put forward in media articles about TikTok. In the second stage, we conducted a technical walkthrough of TikTok. This was done in February 2020 on two different phones, using both Android and iPhone versions of the app. In order to analyse the everyday use of the app both of the researchers used TikTok for at least 30 minutes daily for a period of one month in 2020, and collected extensive fieldnotes, screenshots, and screen recordings. This allowed us to investigate the environment of expected use, user interface arrangement, functions and features, textual content and tone, and symbolic representations present in the app (Light et al., 2018).

Findings and Discussion

In the course of this analysis, we found that the mode of sociality engendered when using TikTok differed from that offered by other prominent social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. While similarly ego-centric and concerned with the performance and management of self-identity, TikTok rewrites the mechanisms of this process through a design that guides users in a different direction than other SNSs.

While traditional SNSs tend to direct the process of self-representation along a number of social channels (i.e. users manage their identities through engagement with their network of friends, followers, etc.), TikTok is designed in a way that encourages users to interact most heavily with two alternative entities: 1. A trending algorithm which presents users with videos ostensibly catered to their personal tastes and interests, and 2. with their own content and self-representations. This results in a model of public

presentation that is most heavily informed by and directed toward the individual instead of an "audience." The experience of using Tik Tok is one of repeatedly engaging with one's own self: intra rather than interpersonal connection.

This effect is accomplished through TikTok's design features and affordances, which shape user experience in a number of ways. For example: upon opening the app, users are directed toward the "for you" section; an endless feed of tiktoks curated by an algorithm specifically for the user. In addition, content creation is heavily incentivized over more distinctly social activities such as commenting, liking, or following. One of the ways in which this is done is through the design of the home screen: the size and placement of the "record" button makes it more natural for users to record and post videos than to find people to follow or comment on videos.

The end result is an SNS that offers a fundamentally different conception of what it means to be social. TikTok offers a site for public performance heavily built upon intrapersonal engagement, done through content creation and heavy interaction with a personalized algorithm which repeatedly confronts users with various aspects of their own personas. This model of sociality can perhaps be termed the "algorithmized self"- an extension and complication of the previously discussed "networked self"; while the latter posits that the self is created through the "reflexive process of fluid associations with social circles, " the former understands the self as deriving primarily from a reflexive engagement with previous self-representations rather than with one's social connections (Papacharissi, 2011)

The user is forced to negotiate identity not by connecting to the outside world through the mechanism of the machine, but rather by engaging with "machinized" selves: the curated algorithm that presents their interests, personality, and identity to them, and the original content they create that is processed by the machine that is Tiktok. In Tiktok, the boundaries between user and platform are intentionally blurred; here more than ever do we see a restless machine, one with as much of a "life" as its human user.

References

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