PRECARITY, DISCRIMINATION AND (IN)VISIBILITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF "THE ALGORITHM" IN THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY

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Introduction

YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system – known colloquially as "The Algorithm" – is a powerful character in the lives of professional and aspiring social media content creators, exerting various pressures on them in their struggles for visibility and income in the influencer industry. Every creator has tales of woe and theories to share about "The Algorithm", and every industry event has panels and discussions dedicated to it: how it works, what content it is currently preferencing, who it is discriminating against, and, most importantly, how to navigate it in order to achieve success.

This paper explores with an anthropological lens the multifaceted and situated ways that YouTube content creators understand and respond to "The Algorithm" in their working lives. Drawing on five years of ethnographic fieldwork in the London and L.A. influencer industries (2017-2022), I investigate "The Algorithm" through three distinct but parallel lenses: what content creators *say* about it (their imaginaries and cultural discourses), their *actions* with regards to it (their cultural practices), and how they *feel* about it (their experiences). In triangulating these three dimensions, this paper aims to provide both a framework for the ethnographic study of algorithms in culture, as well as a detailed account of how YouTube content creators experience and respond to "The Algorithm" in their working lives.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the sociocultural dimensions of algorithms across the social sciences and humanities. Algorithms are an important aspect of the digital media landscape, providing the foundational architecture for how social media platforms are structured; on YouTube, "The Algorithm" sorts and offers content to viewers according to the likelihood that they will watch it based on a variety of metrics, as well as determining which content should be (de)monetised. Researchers have highlighted that algorithms pose unique challenges due to their opacity as so-

called "black boxed" technologies, a characterisation that has in turn been explored, challenged and subverted by a number of qualitative researchers, who variously argue that rather than fetishize or obsess over the opacity of algorithms, understanding them as complex sociotechnical systems made up of actors, meanings and practices offers openings for creative methodological possibilities and more nuanced understandings of their impacts (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2018; Christin, 2020; Seaver, 2017). Ethnography is particularly well suited as a methodology for examining how algorithms emerge through these sociotechnical assemblages in everyday life, able to encompass cultural practices, forms of sociality, and broader institutional factors, as well as discourses. Inspired by these works, I investigate not what YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system does or how it works in some objective sense, but the diverse cultural meanings and values that content creators attach to it, and how platforms, the influencer industry, and the nature of platformised creative work are constituted through these processes.

Methods

I conducted and synthesised participant observation in both the multi-platform social media environment and in settings where the community-industry converges in person, including industry events such as VidCon UK & USA and Summer in the City. This included becoming a YouTube content creator myself which allowed me to reflect on the testimonies of my participants and gain a deeper level of understanding for their lived experiences. The research also included formal semi-structured interviews with thirty London-based content creators. Interviewees represented a broad range of identity categories (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class and ability), and worked across a wide variety of prominent and niche genres, including lifestyle, beauty, gaming, BookTube, education, video essays, animation, LGBTQ+ and feminism, political commentary, film and tech reviews, travel, trending vlog challenges and tags, comedy, and short films. In order to counteract the overemphasis on elite creators in the existing literature, whilst some of my participants were full-time professional influencers, others were aspiring to make the leap from hobbyist to full-time; interviewees ranged widely from 2.2 million subscribers to a single solitary subscriber (myself). Despite this range, all participants emphasised that they regularly struggled with "The Algorithm" in their work.

Findings

Amongst my participants, "The Algorithm" was variously understood as an omnipotent God, a black box to be opened, a mystery to be solved, a voracious machine, and an oppressor of marginalised groups. Above all, it is experienced as unknowable, impenetrable, mysterious, and inscrutable. I argue that the introduction of algorithmic recommendation systems as a key mechanism of labour marks an escalation of the conditions of precarity for platformised creative workers as compared to their counterparts in more traditional cultural industries. Despite the diversity of my participants, I found that they universally understood "The Algorithm" as an antagonistic force, one which made their working lives more precarious, unpredictable and stressful. In addition to broader conditions of precarity, some creators are subject to *algorithmic*

discrimination, which I define as a process whereby certain content, identities and positionalities within the platform economy are deprioritised from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success. In the influencer industry, where "[visibility] is a key vector of instability" (Duffy et al. 2021: 10), creators are obligated to bend themselves to the wills and shifts of algorithmic recommendation systems if they hope to build and sustain careers.

There is a particular urgency underlying this study; with an ever-increasing number of people seeking careers in the influencer industry, it is vital to interrogate the emerging and problematic technological structures that are core to this new form of creative labour. Some may wonder if ethnography is a useful method for investigating platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems, unable to get to the heart of how they "actually work", but I argue that attending to the lived experiences of content creators who navigate algorithms on a daily basis adds a powerful and complimentary dimension to more macro structural critiques of the asymmetries of power built into capitalist algorithmic systems (for example, Noble, 2018). Platform companies "hold a perverse level of power in contemporary culture and society" (Duffy et al. 2021: 9), not least in their role as arbiters of the livelihoods of creative workers in the burgeoning influencer industry, and critical researchers can work to hold them to account. By attending to questions of power in the online and offline fieldsites where the "The Algorithm" emerges, this research aims to make a useful contribution to critical algorithm studies, creative labour, and influencer cultures research, as well as to existing methods literature on the ethnographic research of algorithms (Bishop, 2019; Christin, 2020; Hine, 2017; Seaver, 2017).

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