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ACTIVE CURATION FOR CULTURAL COMMENTARY: YOUNG ADULTS, ALGORITHMS, AND NEWS CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

Social media is a key source of news for young people (Newman et al., 2021). Recent studies have investigated issues of media plurality and news visibility on social media platforms (Dwyer et al., 2020; Martin, 2021) but what is less well understood is the role that users play in curating access to news through their own platform practices. This paper presents findings from a 12-month digital ethnographic study involving 13 young adults and their use of social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, to understand the role of individual agency in user experiences of news and information.

The paper draws on practice theory to conceptualise the ‘active curation’ techniques used by young adults to personalise their social media feeds. It joins a growing body of literature which explores the role of user agency in these settings and investigates the extent to which users can curate and control their experiences on social media, where platform affordances are scarce (Davis, 2017; Merten, 2021; Swart, 2021). Through an examination of the nature of active curation techniques, the study shows how young adults exert local agency over algorithmic determination, offering insight into emerging normative news produsage behaviours.

The study also explores the types of content users categorise as news on social media. It argues that ‘cultural commentary’ content—including memes, casual discussions between friends, and ‘hot takes’ from influencers—can keep users up to date with local and global news. The data shows that even users who self-identify as ‘news avoidant’ interact with cultural commentary content.

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Methodology

This paper presents preliminary findings from a digital ethnography of 13 young Australian adults, aged 18-30, cataloguing their active curation practices and experiences with cultural commentary content on social media platforms. This approach centers data collection through observation of practices in context, specifically “what people are doing with media in different situations and contexts” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 44). As self-reporting can fail to capture practices accurately (González-Bailón & Xenos, 2020), a mixed method of data collection was used. Five interviews were conducted at 2-week intervals, featuring ‘app tours’ where informants shared their screens and narrated their actions, allowing for deeper understanding of user behaviour. Participants were also invited to join the researcher’s authentic social networks for direct observation and encouraged to take screenshots whenever they encountered relevant content between interviews.

Findings

Cotter and Residorf (2020) describe algorithms as experience technologies, which is reflected in the initial findings of this project. Each participant demonstrated an awareness of algorithmic processing in determining what content they were shown on social media, including awareness that this was in constant flux based on their own actions. Participants engaged in a number of curatorial practices that they believed influence what content the algorithm would prioritise, based on the limited affordances available to them (Davis, 2017; Merten, 2021). These included typical social media practices, however, they were enacted consciously to produce a specific result. Practices included viewing or skipping content, commenting, gesturing (e.g. liking), sharing, following links out, as well as following or unfollowing accounts, hiding or snoozing content, reporting content as unsuitable (especially advertising), and reviewing platform settings. Participants expressed a need to consciously engage with these practices on a regular and ongoing basis to “train the algorithm”, indicating that these consumptive practices were active curation practices rather than one-off actions. Active curation practices were frequently used to curate a social media feed that satisfied participant expectations and needs (Fu & Cook, 2021).

Some participants expressed a desire not to follow or access news on these platforms. However, each participant was kept informed of news topics through their social media feeds, typically through content classified in the study as ‘cultural commentary’. This content most frequently involved an influencer or public figure discussing or ridiculing news topics, also referred to colloquially as a ‘hot take’, but frequently also originated from other private individuals within the participant’s social network. Memes, satire, as well as comments and discussions in public and private group settings also featured as sources for emerging news topics, without including an explicit link to professional news content. For example, one participant learnt about the death of Prince Phillip through a TikTok that showcased Twitter memes created in the hour after his death was announced. Participants who were interested in the topic would then follow up by searching for professional news reporting on the topic, while others moved on. Some participants commented that they would temporarily follow an account, including news

media, to keep on top of a topic of interest before unfollowing the account once this need had been satisfied.

Conclusion

This study shows that young adults are aware of the effect that their behaviour on social media platforms has on the algorithms promoting or hiding content to them, and they are engaging in conscious and regular practices to actively curate their social feeds. It also demonstrates how cultural commentary content finds its way to users, in some instances acting as a proxy for formal news reporting, especially for news avoidant users. Some participants expressed they would not have considered cultural commentary content as news if they had been asked about their news media habits on social media, highlighting an opportunity to expand the definition of news in future scholarly inquiry, to better capture news consumption practices on social media platforms. The research also raises important questions about the future of information sharing on social media platforms, and how young adults are shaping news consumption practices. It also challenges journalists and professional news organisations to re-think how they can reach news-averse audiences with verified information through popular and informal conversations on social platforms.

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