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ARTIFACTS, PRACTICES AND SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS IN CONTENT CURATION ON TIKTOK: A STUDY ON POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES CONTENT

Carlos Entrena Serrano
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Trisha Meyer
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Over their two decades of existence, social media have increasingly leaned into algorithmic recommendations to increase user engagement and sustain their business logic (Zuboff, 2019). Platforms have transitioned from a model where users could explicitly choose content sources, to one based on their inferred algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Users' agency over their media diets is shaped differently in this new social media paradigm. Platforms such as TikTok, where algorithmic distribution of content is the standard, afford consumptive curation (Davis, 2017) in new avenues. In this paper we explore this phenomenon, studying how users interact with TikTok to consume political and social issues content.

We follow Lievrouw's (2014) understanding of social media platforms as a triple articulation of technological artifacts, practices and social arrangements. User practices for content curation are shaped by their social context and by platforms' technical design—which offers insights into how users are guided to interact with algorithmic recommendations. We build upon previous research on how TikTok's interface design shapes consumptive curation affordances. We employed Davis's (2020) conceptualisation of affordances mechanisms to argue that social media interface design can request, demand, refuse, encourage, discourage, and allow certain user practices. For example, by establishing different friction levels (5Rights Foundation, 2021, p. 27) that make it more difficult to find, use or understand algorithmic control features (Alvarado & Waern, 2018).

In this paper, we seek to understand how and under what circumstances TikTok affords certain consumptive curation practices to users interested in political and social issues.

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We research how users react to and reappropriate TikTok's interface design to fulfil their consumptive curation goals. We focus on political and social issues as a case study (1) to understand how participants manage their need to find specific content amidst the infinite flow of algorithmic recommendations TikTok presents to them, and (2) in light of the growing relevance of this type of content in the platform. We are interested in how the identified mechanisms of affordance in our previous research correspond—or not—with users' everyday experiences.

Furthermore, we consider how users' perception and skills, as well as their institutional and cultural arrangements (Davis, 2020), shape their practices and experiences with algorithmic personalization, and how they experience algorithmic curation in two different but interrelated ways, as instrumental and/or intimate (Savolainen & Ruckenstein, 2022). From an instrumental perspective, users' algorithmic literacy and ability to enact it heavily impact their experience. They construct folk theories on how these algorithms work (Karizat et al., 2021) and sometimes try to find workarounds to achieve their consumptive curation goals. From an intimate viewpoint, users are in a position of vulnerability with algorithmic curation. When a successful personalisation happens, users are more willing to give up control of these systems and perceive them as useful tools that create a sense of familiarity and empowerment. However, users frequently detect failures in the algorithmic identity that is being constructed of them but without them. In these cases they can try to resist and reconfigure algorithmic personalisation. Often both realities happen simultaneously (Siles et al., 2023).

Methodologically, we engage with users in two different rounds. First, we conduct semi-structured interviews with approx. 15 users to discuss how they use and experience TikTok for political and social issues content. The participants are asked to donate their TikTok data for analysis at the end of the first session. After this, we employ the donated data, together with the TikTok API, to generate different graphs and statistics of each participant's content consumption—inspired by the Spotify Wrapped tool.

We conduct a second semi-structured interview with the same participants, where the analysed data donations are employed to deepen the discussion and reflections about their engagement with TikTok. The developed dashboards enable users to see (1) how many videos they watch, like and save per month, (2) which accounts they engaged with the most and (3) prevalent hashtags in their consumed content, among other statistics.

By establishing two different points of contact and analysing their data donations, we aim to discuss both self-reported behaviour and "real behaviour". We expect by bringing data into the second round we can improve participants' perception and skills about algorithmic curation—their algorithmic literacy. This helps participants elucidate further responses and a deeper reflection of their practices related to news content curation on the platform—both instrumentally and intimately.

Expected findings illuminate how and under what circumstances TikTok affords consumptive curation to users interested in political and social issues. We aim to gain a better understanding of how TikTok operates as an articulation of technological artifacts, practices and social arrangements and how users negotiate affordances with the

platform; reacting or reappropriating TikTok features to fulfil their own consumptive curation goals.

We also expect this work to be a valuable methodological contribution to the field. First, because it uses donated data to contrast and complement how users perceive their experiences with algorithmic content curation in social media, fostering further reflections. Second, the developed software will be made available for reuse or repurposing for future academic work.

Apart from this, we see a significant potential to use the same methodological approach for future consumptive curation studies in other social media platforms, and different types of content. We also hope this research can serve to promote the implementation of tools in social media platforms such as TikTok, allowing users to better understand the content they consume.

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