

Algorithmic ritual chains on TikTok

Abstract:

Algorithmic encounters have become habitual in everyday life. People engage with algorithms on their smartphones, in their leisure time or at work, and their actions can regulate people's lives without them even acknowledging it. One particular relevant type of algorithm is those used to generate algorithmic recommendations. From films, music, potential lovers or books, platforms develop powerful algorithms to predict what users might like and need. However, algorithmic recommendations do not suggest the same content to all users but adapt their recommendations dynamically through endless feedback loops based on users' engagement with them. In this presentation, I will focus on how feedback loops between user and algorithm can be studied through the lens of interaction ritual theory (Collins, 2004). In doing so, I will study algorithmic encounters, analyzing how affective states shape the kind of recommendations users get and, at the same time, how recommender systems have the capacity to affect users on TikTok.

TikTok has become a popular space enabling new forms of communication, especially among younger people. Beyond moral panics about its disruptive role in society, young people's use of TikTok gets embedded in the everyday lives, experiences and fantasies of its users. Through digital ethnography, I explore how the circulation of TikToks becomes a space intimately linked to the lifeworld of the user and a space for the circulation of collective representations entrapped on different degrees of shared feelings. The use of the concept of algorithmic ritual chains supports two different aims: firstly, it helps us understand how affects shape and (re)shape recommendations through binding flows of emotional energy generated between user and algorithm. Second, it shows how interaction ritual theory can help study the actions of users scrolling down through the app, and at the same time, participates in the debate about the adequacy of interaction ritual theory to study algorithmic encounters and digital processes, at broad.

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