

Who Decides What We See? Algorithms, Platforms, and the Transformation of Cultural Production in the Social Media Age

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of the processes through which cultural content is produced, selected, made visible, and reinterpreted by users, as a consequence of the diffusion of digital platforms and their algorithmic logics. Drawing on the concept of platformization and on the notion of algorithmic culture, the article reconstructs, from a sociological standpoint, the shift from an editorial logic grounded in the expert judgment of professional gatekeepers to an algorithmic logic grounded in datafication and computational ranking. Through the discussion of documented empirical cases drawn from journalism, digital gaming, music streaming, fashion, and online video, the article shows how cultural producers have developed strategies for optimizing their visibility, which platform companies tend to recode as illegitimate manipulation, generating a dynamic here termed platform paternalism that consolidates the discursive and material power of digital intermediaries. The concluding discussion situates these processes within the broader questions of public value and governance raised by recent platform studies scholarship, proposing an integrated reading of algorithmic power as a phenomenon that is simultaneously technical and discursive. The article argues that answering the question of who decides what audiences see requires the sociology of cultural and communicative processes to develop conceptual tools capable of capturing the hybrid, material and symbolic nature of a power exercised as much in lines of code as in the way that code is named, invoked, and legitimized in public discourse.

Keywords: Platformization, algorithms, cultural production, algorithmic visibility, platform governance

Introduction

The question of who decides what we see revives a classic problem of the sociology of cultural and communicative processes: that of gatekeeping, the process by which, out of an undifferentiated mass of available symbolic content, only some of it is selected to reach the public. Over the past decade and a half this problem has undergone a radical reconfiguration. Functions once performed by newsrooms, record labels, publishers and broadcasters have been progressively redistributed between human actors and computational systems that classify, rank, recommend and render content visible or invisible according to logics that remain, for the most part, opaque to those who are subject to them (Gillespie, 2014; Beer, 2017). This article adopts as its general theoretical frame the concept of platformization, defined by Nieborg and Poell (2018) as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries" (p. 4276). This definition has the merit of not reducing the phenomenon to a simple technical intermediation, but of locating it simultaneously on three distinct and interconnected planes: markets, governance and computational infrastructure, the three axes along which the following discussion is organized.

On the level of markets, business-studies research shows how platforms have replaced traditional two-sided configurations (publisher–reader–advertiser) with complex "multisided" markets, in which a growing number of actors, end-users, advertisers, developers and content producers, are brought together by an intermediary that extracts value through direct and indirect network effects (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4277). In this configuration, cultural producers are typically positioned on the "subsidy side" of the market, while the "money side" is constituted by end-users and advertisers, a structurally precarious position that renders cultural content, news, songs, games, fashion posts, interchangeable in the eyes of the platform holder (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, pp. 4278, 4282–4283). On the level of governance, a small number of transnational corporations, commonly referred to in the literature by the acronym GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft), set global standards of conduct through terms of service, developer guidelines and content moderation policies that tend to override the historical, cultural and political specificities of individual fields of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4285; Poell, Nieborg, Duffy, Prey, & Cunningham, 2017). On the level of infrastructure, finally,

access to Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), Software Development Kits (SDKs) and data analytics services constitutes the means through which platforms integrate cultural producers into their own data flows, generating forms of technical and economic dependency that some authors describe as "infrastructural capture" (Nechushtai, 2018, cited in Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4288).

It is useful, at this point, to recall the distinction, proposed by Tarleton Gillespie (2014) and taken up systematically by Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4280), between editorial logic and algorithmic logic. Whereas the former relies on a knowledge system codified through "the choices of experts," the latter "depends on the proceduralized choices of a machine, designed by human operators to automate some proxy of human judgment or unearth patterns across collected social traces" (Gillespie, 2014, p. 192, cited in Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4280). This shift from an epistemic regime grounded in expert judgment to one grounded in the computational processing of data does not eliminate the human component; algorithms remain, as Beer (2017) reminds us, "socio-technical assemblages" in which the entanglement of human and machine agency remains constitutive. What changes profoundly is the location of that judgment, which moves from the moment of content creation to the often invisible moment of its algorithmic modelling.

The theoretical framework adopted here finds further grounding in the analytical proposal of Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018), who, in their work on the platform society, identify three constitutive mechanisms of platform operation, datafication, commodification and selection, which cut across heterogeneous sectors such as news, urban transport, healthcare and education, and lead ultimately to a reflection on the need for a value-centric design of platforms and for a governance shared among market actors, civil society and government institutions (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). This framework allows the analysis to move beyond a purely technicist reading of the algorithmic phenomenon, restoring centrality to the political and economic dimension of platformization: as Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4277) observe, the term "platform" itself, as Gillespie (2010, 2017) argues, "obfuscates as much as it reveals," obscuring how social media and other digital services, labeled as platforms, do not merely facilitate socio-economic, cultural and political interaction, but actively organize and steer it. Building on these premises, this article addresses the following research question: in what ways does the algorithmic logic of platforms transform the processes through which cultural content is produced, selected, made visible, and reinterpreted by users? The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The Methods section outlines the conceptual and analytical approach adopted. The Results section reconstructs the algorithmic

architecture of cultural visibility, introducing the notion of the contingent cultural commodity (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), and then examines, through documented empirical cases, the visibility-optimization practices of cultural producers and their discursive recoding by platforms as illegitimate "gaming," a dynamic that Petre, Duffy and Hund (2019) term platform paternalism. The Discussion section shifts attention to the discursive power of the very notion of the algorithm (Beer, 2017; Striphas, 2015) and to the governance implications of the analysis, before the Conclusions return synthetically to the research question.

Methods

This article adopts a qualitative, conceptual and interpretive methodology, consistent with the theoretical tradition of critical platform studies and the sociology of cultural and communicative processes. Rather than collecting new empirical data, the analysis proceeds through a critical, comparative synthesis of a corpus of peer-reviewed primary sources in media, communication and cultural sociology, selected because each addresses, from a distinct disciplinary angle, the relationship between platform infrastructures, algorithmic systems and cultural production: theoretical accounts of platformization and the contingent cultural commodity (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), of platform mechanisms and public value within the platform society (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018), of the social power of algorithms (Beer, 2017) and of algorithmic culture (Striphas, 2015), together with two empirically grounded studies: a comparative panel analysis of platformization across the news, gaming, music, fashion and video sectors (Poell, Nieborg, Duffy, Prey, & Cunningham, 2017) and a qualitative content analysis of platform "gaming" accusations, based on a corpus of 105 news articles and seven platform guideline documents, coded through a grounded-theory approach (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019).

The synthesis follows the three-level analytical model proposed by Nieborg and Poell (2018), organizing the discussion around shifts in market structures, governance frameworks and computational infrastructures, and applies this model deductively to the documented cases of visibility management discussed in the sources. Consistent with a conceptual-review methodology, the analysis does not involve statistical procedures, human or animal subjects, or the collection of original data; all empirical illustrations discussed below (case studies, corpora, and quantitative details such as article counts) are drawn directly from, and attributed to, the cited primary studies.

Results

The datafication, commodification, and algorithmic selection of cultural content

The first of the three mechanisms through which platforms reorganize cultural production is datafication, understood, following the overview offered by Poell and colleagues (2017) with reference to digital publishing, as the systematic collection and algorithmic processing of usage data, which marks a shift from an editorially-driven to a demand-driven mode of cultural production. This process does not concern circulation alone, but feeds back into the very stage of content conception and realization. The case of digital-native publishers such as BuzzFeed is paradigmatic in this respect: content production begins with the identification of trending social-media topics and popular search terms, proceeds through the calculation of production costs and of the traffic and advertising or sponsorship potential of a given topic and format (text or video), and continues, once content has been published, with the systematic tracking of engagement, social referrals, comments, search rank, and page views, used to determine whether it is profitable to further edit and promote the content, or to halt the engagement-optimization cycle (Poell et al., 2017; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276).

This dynamic produces what Nieborg and Poell (2018), building on Nieborg's (2015) earlier work on the game industry, define as the contingent cultural commodity: a cultural product that is no longer a stable, finished artefact, but a modular object, continuously reworked and repackaged on the basis of datafied user feedback (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). The authors carefully distinguish two complementary senses of "contingent": contingency as dependence, whereby cultural producers become increasingly "contingent on" a small group of dominant platforms, a relation the authors term platform dependence, and contingency as malleability, whereby the product itself becomes open to constant revision and recirculation (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). The case of free-to-play games, reconstructed by Nieborg's contribution to the AoIR 2017 panel, illustrates the second sense particularly well: a title such as Candy Crush Saga is first launched in selected national app stores, a so-called "soft launch" in markets such as New Zealand, Ireland or Malaysia, in order to gather player data and feedback; a revision phase follows, after which the game "goes live" globally and is supported by granular advertising campaigns built on detailed player demographics, while the "lifetime value" metric allows the developer to determine whether in-app purchase revenue outweighs user-acquisition costs (Poell et al., 2017). The industry's operative rule, in this model, becomes the effective aggregation and monetization of a small, highly profitable group of paying users, commonly referred to as "whales" (Nieborg, 2015, cited in Poell et al., 2017).

A structurally analogous datafication process, applied to a different cultural domain, emerges from Prey's contribution on the platformization of popular music (in Poell et al., 2017). Prey observes that streaming turns every moment of music listening into data: every volume adjustment, every skip, every artist search, every abandoned listening session communicates something about a user's musical taste, according to the co-founder of the music-analytics company The Echo Nest, later acquired by Spotify (Lamere, 2014, cited in Poell et al., 2017). This "datafication of listening" (Prey, 2016, cited in Poell et al., 2017) enables practices such as A/B testing of alternative versions of the same track, for instance comparing listener retention when a song's "hook" is placed within the first thirty seconds versus when it arrives only at the first chorus, extending and amplifying the modular potential of popular music, and turning songs themselves into rearrangeable objects calibrated to the perceived taste profiles of listeners (Poell et al., 2017).

The second mechanism, commodification, concerns the conversion of attention, behavioral data and user reputation into exchangeable economic value. At the macro-economic level, critical political-economy scholarship situates this process within the broader accumulative tendency of capital and of proprietary concentration that characterizes what Srnicek (2016) terms "platform capitalism," a regime in which user-generated cultural production, while vital and widespread, remains subsumed under the centralized, proprietary control of a small number of actors (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4279). Benkler (2006), critically revisited by Nieborg and Poell (2018), had hypothesized that the networked information economy might reverse the dominance of the industrial mode of information production; more recent research shows, on the contrary, that the dominance of the major platforms fully advances what Benkler himself called "the project of control," resting on the twin pillars of commercialization and corporate concentration (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4279).

The third mechanism, selection, is the most directly relevant to the research question of this article, since it concerns explicitly the processes through which some content is made visible and other content is not. Beer (2017) observes that the social power of algorithms unfolds, in this respect, along at least three distinct yet interconnected lines. The first concerns the entanglement of human and machine agency in decision-making processes, a theme rooted in the cybernetic and post-humanist debate (Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999, cited in Beer, 2017) but which today assumes specific forms tied to the capacity of algorithms to make choices, or to supply information that shapes human choices, without this process being fully transparent either to designers or to users (Beer, 2017). The second line concerns the role of algorithms in shaping institutional, organizational and commercial decision-making: in the same special issue edited by Beer, Karen Yeung introduces

the notion of the "hypernudge" to describe how big-data systems and design-based regulatory architectures pervasively and pre-emptively shape user behavior (Beer, 2017). The third line concerns properly the politics of algorithmic sorting, classification and prediction, the capacity of platform systems to decide what matters, what should be more visible, which content deserves to appear in a user's feed or at the top of a search engine (Beer, 2017). It is here that the phenomenon of "filter bubbles," discussed by Pariser (2011) and revisited critically in the same volume edited by Beer, becomes relevant: the tendency of algorithmic recommendation systems to progressively narrow the range of cultural experiences and social connections to which a user is exposed, reinforcing already consolidated patterns rather than favoring encounters with heterogeneous content (Beer, 2017).

It is important to stress, following Beer (2017), that understanding the power of algorithms in the selection of cultural content requires avoiding two symmetrical errors: on the one hand, treating the algorithm as a self-contained technical object, detachable from the social context that produced it and that continually shapes its redesign, an error also flagged by Neyland and Möllers, cited in Beer (2017), who argue that algorithmic power should be understood as "an effect and not a cause of events"; on the other hand, underestimating the capacity of such systems, precisely because of their opacity, to produce, through the aggregation of proceduralized choices, real and lasting effects on the distribution of cultural visibility, effects that Pasquale (2015, p. 8, cited in Beer, 2017) captures when he observes that "authority is increasingly expressed algorithmically." It is from this tension between technical opacity and tangible material effects that the following section moves to examine the concrete practices through which cultural producers attempt to render themselves "algorithmically recognizable" (Bucher, 2012, cited in Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019), and the frequently punitive reactions that such practices elicit from platforms.

Producer practices of visibility optimization and platform paternalism

If the previous section reconstructed the structural architecture of algorithmic selection, attention must now turn to the level of practice: how do cultural producers concretely respond to the need to become visible within ranking systems that remain largely opaque? The literature gathered in the AoIR 2017 panel edited by Poell and colleagues offers, in this respect, a particularly instructive comparative overview, since it shows how analogous practices of adaptation to algorithmic logic cut across very different cultural sectors, while taking distinct forms depending on the history and degree of platform dependence of each field.

In the domain of news journalism, Poell's contribution observes that digital publishers do not merely passively monitor engagement metrics but develop genuine production strategies oriented toward maximizing them; in the case of BuzzFeed, however, the evaluation of traffic data is not mechanical and undifferentiated, since traffic figures for investigative journalism are weighed differently from those for listicles and quizzes, a sign that adaptation to metrics does not eliminate editorial judgment but recalibrates it (Poell et al., 2017). In the domain of fashion and influencer culture, Duffy's contribution documents how content producers must balance the construction of an image of authenticity and creative independence with the economic need to generate a constant stream of content aligned with brand-favored aesthetics, within a system, mediated by affiliate services such as LIKEtoKNOW.it, whose remuneration structure is heavily shaped by pre-existing disparities in social, economic and aesthetic capital (Duffy, in Poell et al., 2017). Duffy, drawing on Ross's (2009) notion of the "jackpot economy," observes that the influencer system, contrary to the meritocratic rhetoric that accompanies it, does not constitute a genuinely open environment, but rather a technologically mediated reproduction of social hierarchies already characteristic of the traditional women's-magazine and advertising industries (Duffy, in Poell et al., 2017). In the domain of online video, finally, Cunningham observes that creators operate within an "algorithmic culture" (Striphas, 2015, cited by Cunningham in Poell et al., 2017) that imposes constant and regular upload rhythms and commits creators to increasing workloads across multiple platforms simultaneously, while authenticity and community, built through a constant dialogic relationship with the audience, constitute the symbolic commodity that brands subsequently exploit, in a relationship that is parasitic upon the creator's original bond with their community (Cunningham, in Poell et al., 2017).

It is, however, the contribution of Petre, Duffy and Hund (2019) that offers the most systematic analysis of visibility-optimization practices and, above all, of their discursive recoding by platforms. The authors conduct a qualitative content analysis, carried out with the Dedoose software following a grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), of a corpus of 105 news articles and seven official documents (press releases and user guidelines) concerning three paradigmatic episodes, selected according to the logic of "data outcroppings" proposed by Luker (2008): Google's December 2013 demotion of the lyrics-annotation site Rap Genius from its search results, in response to a link-exchange program regarded as a manipulation of PageRank; Facebook's December 2017 announcement of a systematic crackdown on "engagement bait," that is, content specifically designed to elicit likes, shares and comments; and the April 2017 shutdown, at

Instagram's request, of the bot service Instagress, which automated likes and comments on behalf of subscribed users (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019, pp. 4-5).

The analysis reveals a recurrent discursive pattern that the authors term platform paternalism: a rhetorical device through which platforms present themselves as neutral arbiters, exclusively committed to safeguarding the values of authenticity and community integrity, while condemning, in strongly moralized terms, producers accused of "gaming" the system (Petre et al., 2019, p. 1). The boundary between legitimate strategic practice and illegitimate algorithmic manipulation is, according to the authors, "nebulous and largely reflective of [platforms'] material interests" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 1), yet the language used to draw it is anything but neutral: three metaphorical clusters, in particular, structure both the journalistic narratives and the official communications analyzed by the authors. The first, the dichotomy between "organic" and "artificial," borrows from the language of food production the association between unmanipulated growth and moral virtue, health and purity (Shapin, 2006, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 6): Google in fact describes its unpaid search results not as "editorial" but as "organic," and when it communicated its penalty decision to Rap Genius it cited the presence of "unnatural links" to the site (Genius, 2014, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 6). The second cluster, that of crime and moral deviance, casts accused producers in the role of "offenders" and platforms in that of the adjudicating authority, recalling, in the authors' reading, which draws on Lakoff's (1995) analysis of the moral metaphor of the nuclear family, the archetype of the "Strict Father," a figure of moral authority who "insists on his moral authority, commands obedience, and when he doesn't get it, metes out retribution as fairly and justly as he knows how" (Lakoff, 1995, p. 10, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 7). The third cluster, that of games and cheating, assimilates practices such as the use of bots or the formation of mutual-engagement "pods" to doping in competitive sport, and describes platform sanctions through metaphors borrowed from sports refereeing, such as time spent in the "penalty box" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 8).

The most significant aspect of Petre, Duffy and Hund's (2019) analysis, however, lies not only in the reconstruction of these metaphorical clusters, but in the identification of a structural double standard: the same platforms that valorize, within their own organizational cultures, rapid growth, scalability, efficiency and the systematic use of automation (Levina & Hasinoff, 2017, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 8) demand from content producers precisely the opposite, an artisanal, non-instrumental approach grounded in "personal voice" and in the spontaneous creation of "genuine content" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 8). This double standard, the authors argue, performs a twofold function: on the one hand it consolidates platforms'

reputation as meritocracies in which the best content naturally rises to the top with the help of a sophisticated yet impartial algorithm; on the other hand it serves their economic interests, since it insinuates that explicitly strategic, profit-oriented activity should be channeled toward the paid promotion tools offered by the platform itself (Petre et al., 2019, pp. 8-9).

The consequences of this dynamic are not evenly distributed among cultural producers, but instead amplify pre-existing material inequalities among categories of creative labor. Rap Genius, buoyed by substantial venture-capital funding, was able to devote significant resources to identifying and removing links deemed "unnatural" by Google and thereby recover its visibility; independent creators who had relied on Instagress, by contrast, found themselves without economically sustainable alternatives for maintaining their visibility on Instagram, and many turned instead to forming mutual-engagement "pods," a practice that, although not officially banned, was in turn stigmatized in press coverage and led, in 2018, to the removal of several organized groups from Facebook (Petre et al., 2019, pp. 8-9). This dynamic is corroborated by the broader theoretical framework proposed by Nieborg and Poell (2018), who observe that multisided market configurations tend to produce strong winner-take-all effects that leave individual developers or producers little room to mitigate structural imbalances or to negotiate more favorable conditions (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4279).

Alongside these strategic optimization dynamics, on the side of reception and user interpretation, stands the phenomenon of "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 3) and of "folk theories" (DeVito, Gergle, & Birnholtz, 2017, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 3): collective, often approximate and fragmentary representations through which users and cultural producers attempt to reconstruct the functioning of structurally opaque computational systems, elaborating shared theories about the causes of their own algorithmic visibility or invisibility. Myers West (2018, cited in Petre et al., 2019, p. 3) observes, in this respect, that "neither the users, nor the platform, nor this author are well placed to accurately assess why these users' content was flagged," so that any such interpretation remains, at best, a plausible conjecture rather than a verifiable determination, a condition that becomes particularly salient in practices such as shadowbanning. It is precisely in this space of interpretive uncertainty, fed by the systemic opacity of platform algorithms, that the theme discussed in the following section is rooted: the power, not merely technical but discursive, of the very notion of the "algorithm."

Discussion

The analyses developed in the Results section have shown that the power of platforms over the selection of cultural content is exercised through technical mechanisms, datafication, commodification, algorithmic ranking, and through discursive legitimation practices such as platform paternalism. Beer (2017) invites us, however, to add a further level of analysis, distinguishing between the power of algorithms as such, their material capacity to produce outcomes, rankings and classifications, and the power of the notion of the algorithm, that is, the way the term itself circulates in public, organizational and institutional discourse, contributing to the construction and legitimation of particular social rationalities. Drawing on the Foucauldian analysis of the production of truth as a constitutive dimension of power (Foucault, 2004, cited in Beer, 2017), Beer argues that algorithms produce truth in a twofold sense: on the one hand through their material interventions, the classifications and predictions that become, in effect, operative truths about risk, taste, merit and relevance; on the other hand through discursive interventions, since the mere evocation of the term "algorithm," irrespective of its actual technical functioning, carries persuasive weight capable of suggesting neutrality, objectivity and efficiency, thereby contributing to normalize the expansion of computational systems within organizational and social structures (Beer, 2017, pp. 8-9).

This discursive dimension is explored in particularly fine-grained fashion by Striphas (2015), who, drawing on the notion of "algorithmic culture" coined by Galloway (2006), reconstructs, through a historico-semantic approach, the progressive transfer of culture's own classificatory labor, the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects and ideas, toward computational processes. The case Striphas analyzes to illustrate what is at stake in this transfer is the episode known as #AmazonFail, which took place at Easter 2009: a technician at Amazon's French office mistakenly altered the value of a single database attribute, from "false" to "true" for the field labeled "adult," triggering the automatic removal of more than 57,000 titles from the site's ranking and recommendation systems, including a disproportionate number of gay- and lesbian-themed works (Striphas, 2015, pp. 396-397). The episode, which Amazon characterized as "an embarrassing and ham-fisted cataloging error" (quoted in James, 2009a, cited in Striphas, 2015, p. 396), demonstrates clearly how apparently technical decisions, the modification of a single database field, can translate into culturally significant and politically charged effects on the visibility of entire categories of works, largely independently of the intent or awareness of the human operators involved.

Through a lexical reconstruction inspired by Raymond Williams's (1983) keywords method, Striphas (2015) identifies in three terms,

information, crowd and algorithm, the semantic core around which the very concept of culture has been reorganized over the past three decades. The history of the term "information," which originates in religious and legal usage to denote the act of "giving form or essential character to something" (Striphas, 2015, p. 399), undergoes a decisive turn with mid-twentieth-century cybernetics: in Bateson's (2000/1971, cited in Striphas, 2015, p. 400) formulation, information becomes "a difference which makes a difference," a definition that dispenses entirely with any human recipient of the message and that levels, under a single computational logic, human beings and machines. Similarly, the history of the term "crowd," from the strongly negative nineteenth-century notion of the irrational mass theorized by Le Bon (2002/1895, cited in Striphas, 2015, pp. 401-402) to the contemporary, positively valorized notion of "crowd wisdom" and "collective intelligence," shows how concepts once laden with suspicion have been reconverted into legitimating resources for algorithmic recommendation systems, which present themselves as an expression of user "democracy" (Levy, 2010, cited in Striphas, 2015, p. 407). Finally, the history of the term "algorithm" itself, a corrupted transliteration of the name of the Persian mathematician al-Khwārizmī, which in medieval Europe denoted both arithmetic calculation and, through its association with zero and with the "cipher," encryption and the concealment of meaning (Striphas, 2015, pp. 403-405), reveals a long-standing semantic tension between revelation and concealment that contemporary algorithmic culture reproduces: the algorithms of dominant platforms are presented as instruments of transparent, meritocratic access to cultural relevance, while remaining, in Gillespie's (2007, p. 222, cited in Striphas, 2015, p. 407) words, "welded shut" and withdrawn from external verification.

The conclusion Striphas (2015) reaches is of particular relevance to the research question of this article: what is at stake in algorithmic culture is not merely a technical transformation of cultural selection processes, but the progressive "privatization" of a decision-making process, the process that determines what counts as culturally relevant, which was once, however imperfectly, subject to forms of public contestation within a hierarchical system organized around newsrooms and editors (Striphas, 2015, p. 406). Companies such as Amazon, Google and Facebook, Striphas argues, critically revisiting Matthew Arnold's classic definition of culture as "a principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy which seems to be threatening us" (Arnold, 1993/1869, p. 89, cited in Striphas, 2015, p. 406), become, notwithstanding their populist and democratizing rhetoric, "the new apostles of culture" (Striphas, 2015, p. 407), an expression that resonates directly with the notion of platform paternalism discussed above. Gillespie (2011, cited in Striphas, 2015, p. 407), writing about Twitter's

Trends list, offers an observation that effectively synthesizes the problem under discussion here: the relevant question is not whether Twitter censors its Trends list, but what the public assumes that list to be, given that, as he puts it, "we don't have a sufficient vocabulary for assessing the algorithmic intervention" in tools of this kind.

This observation, the absence of a shared vocabulary and of publicly accountable procedures for evaluating algorithmic intervention, leads directly to the governance questions raised by platform-society scholarship. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) locate the entire problem of the algorithmic selection of cultural content within a structural tension between public value and private interest, arguing for a rethinking of platform governance that coordinates three categories of actors: market actors, who must be held accountable for design and algorithmic choices with significant public consequences; civil-society actors, capable of producing independent scrutiny and of representing the interests of structurally weaker categories of users and producers; and governmental institutions, called upon to intervene with regulatory tools that go beyond platforms' voluntary self-regulation (Van Dijck et al., 2018). A comparable perspective is echoed directly in the conclusion proposed by Petre, Duffy and Hund (2019, p. 10), who argue that the underlying problem is not the existence of a boundary between legitimate and illegitimate visibility practices, a boundary that, however historically shifting and to some degree inevitably arbitrary, must nonetheless be drawn, but the fact that this boundary continues to be defined and enforced unilaterally and unaccountably by platform companies alone. The authors accordingly call for the democratization of the deliberative process through which definitions of algorithmic manipulation are formulated, a process that should involve a wider array of social actors, in particular those cultural producers whose livelihoods depend directly on algorithmic visibility (Petre et al., 2019, p. 10).

Conclusions

In light of the argument developed in this article, it is now possible to return synthetically to the research question posed at the outset. The algorithmic logic of platforms transforms cultural production along at least four distinct levels, which the analysis has sought to hold constantly in dialogue with one another. At the level of production, cultural content shifts from a relatively stable artefact into a contingent commodity, modular and continuously reworked on the basis of datafied feedback (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). At the level of selection, expert editorial judgment is joined, and in many contexts progressively displaced, by computational ranking that, while presenting itself as neutral and meritocratic, reflects design choices oriented by specific commercial interests (Gillespie, 2014; Beer, 2017). At the level

of visibility, cultural producers develop strategic optimization practices that platforms systematically recode, through a strongly moralized vocabulary, as forms of illegitimate manipulation, generating a platform-paternalism dynamic that amplifies pre-existing material inequalities among categories of producers (Petre et al., 2019). At the level of reinterpretation, finally, users and producers elaborate algorithmic imaginaries and folk theories in order to navigate structurally opaque systems, in a context in which, as the limit case of #AmazonFail shows, the very distinction between technical error and political choice risks becoming, for those who experience its consequences, substantially indiscernible (Striphas, 2015). In this sense, answering the question of who decides what we see today requires the sociology of cultural and communicative processes not only to identify new actors, platforms, their algorithms, datafied communities of users, but to develop conceptual tools capable of accounting for the hybrid, simultaneously technical and discursive, material and symbolic, nature of a power exercised as much in lines of code as in the way those lines of code are named, invoked and legitimized in the public sphere.

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