

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

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Abstract

This conceptual article examines how the algorithmic logic of digital platforms transforms the processes through which cultural content is produced, selected, made visible, and reinterpreted. It is based on a theory-driven integrative review of peer-reviewed scholarship in platform studies and the sociology of cultural production, which combines a core corpus of anchor studies with research published after 2019 and applies explicit criteria for selecting literature and illustrative cases. Drawing on the concepts of platformization and algorithmic culture, the article reconstructs the shift from an editorial logic grounded in expert judgment to an algorithmic logic grounded in datafication and computational ranking. Through documented cases from journalism, digital gaming, music streaming, fashion, and online video, it shows how cultural producers develop strategies to optimize their visibility and how platforms recode such strategies as illegitimate manipulation, a dynamic that previous research has termed platform paternalism. The analysis yields three propositions, concerning the contingency of cultural visibility, the asymmetric legitimacy of optimization practices, and the organized opacity of ranking systems. Its main contribution is an integrated model of the double register of algorithmic power, in which the material capacity to rank content and the discursive capacity to define legitimate visibility reinforce each other in a circuit of legitimation. The article concludes that this power is exercised as much in lines of code as in the ways

that code is named, invoked, and legitimized in public discourse, and it outlines limitations and directions for empirical research.

Keywords: Platformization, algorithmic visibility, cultural production, recommender systems, platform governance

Introduction

The question of who decides what we see revives a classic problem of the sociology of cultural and communicative processes, namely gatekeeping, the process by which only a small part of an undifferentiated mass of available symbolic content 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 does not reduce the phenomenon to a simple technical intermediation. It locates it simultaneously on three distinct and interconnected planes, markets, governance, and computational infrastructure, which are also 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, including 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. This structurally precarious position renders cultural content, whether news, songs, games, or 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 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 et al., 2017). On the level of infrastructure, finally, access to application programming interfaces (APIs), software development kits (SDKs), and data analytics services is the means through which platforms integrate cultural producers into their own data flows. Nechushtai (2018) describes the resulting forms of technical and economic dependency as a potential “infrastructural capture” of media organizations by digital platforms.

It is useful, at this point, to recall the distinction proposed by Gillespie (2014), and taken up systematically by Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4280), between editorial logic and algorithmic logic. Whereas the former relies on the judgment of experts, trained and authorized through institutional processes, 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). 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 is constitutive. What changes profoundly is the location of judgment, which moves from the moment of content creation to the often invisible moment of algorithmic modelling.

The theoretical framework adopted here finds further grounding in the analytical proposal of van Dijck et al. (2018), who identify three constitutive mechanisms of platform operation: datafication, commodification, and selection. These mechanisms cut across heterogeneous sectors such as news, urban transport, healthcare, and education, and lead the authors to argue for a value-centric design of platforms and for governance shared among market actors, civil society, and government institutions (van Dijck et al., 2018). This framework allows the analysis to move beyond a purely technicist reading of the algorithmic phenomenon and restores centrality to the political and economic dimension of platformization. Gillespie (2010) has shown, in this respect, that the very term “platform” is a discursive choice that allows digital intermediaries to present themselves as neutral and open facilitators to users, advertisers, and policymakers alike, while obscuring the extent to which they actively organize and steer social, economic, and cultural interaction.

Since 2019, research on these issues has grown rapidly. The study of platform practices in the cultural industries has been consolidated in dedicated collections and monographs (Duffy et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2022), the sociology of algorithms has developed new theoretical tools to explain how algorithms are themselves socialized through the data they learn from (Airoldi, 2022), ethnographic work has examined how recommender systems are designed to capture and retain users (Seaver, 2019), and platform governance

has emerged as an autonomous field of inquiry (Gorwa, 2019; Gorwa et al., 2020). These literatures, however, tend to proceed along separate tracks. Political-economy studies analyze platform dependence and market concentration, studies of creative labor examine the visibility practices of producers, critical cultural studies investigate how the notion of the algorithm is invoked in public discourse, and governance studies discuss regulatory responses. What remains less developed is an account of how the material and the discursive dimensions of algorithmic power interlock in the specific domain of cultural visibility.

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 contribution of the article is threefold. First, it offers a transparent synthesis of a body of literature that is usually discussed in fragmented form, organized around four analytical moments (production, selection, visibility, reinterpretation). Second, it formulates three analytical propositions that go beyond the individual studies reviewed, concerning the contingency of cultural visibility, the asymmetric legitimacy of optimization practices, and the organized opacity of ranking systems. Third, and most importantly, it proposes an integrated model of the double register of algorithmic power, according to which the material capacity of platforms to rank content and their discursive capacity to define what counts as legitimate visibility reinforce each other in a self-sustaining circuit of legitimation. The article does not report new empirical data. It advances a conceptual model intended to orient future empirical research.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The Methods section sets out the research design, the criteria used to select the literature and the empirical cases, and the procedure followed to synthesize and interpret the sources. The Results section presents, for each analytical level, the evidence drawn from the literature and the proposition derived from it. It first reconstructs the algorithmic architecture of cultural visibility, introducing the notion of the contingent cultural commodity (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), then examines the visibility-optimization practices of cultural producers and their discursive recoding by platforms as illegitimate “gaming,” a dynamic that Petre et al. (2019) term platform paternalism, and finally considers the algorithmic imaginaries through which producers and users make sense of opaque systems. The Discussion section addresses the discursive power of the very notion of the algorithm (Beer, 2017; Striphos, 2015), presents the integrated model, examines its governance implications, and discusses the limitations of the study and directions for future research. The Conclusions return to the research question.

Methods

Research design

This article is a conceptual study. It does not collect new empirical data, but develops theoretical arguments by integrating and reinterpreting existing research. Among the approaches to conceptual articles distinguished by Jaakkola (2020), it follows primarily a theory-synthesis design, whose aim is to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories or literature streams and to offer a new or enhanced view of a phenomenon. In its final step, it also draws on the model approach described by Jaakkola (2020), since it articulates the relations among the concepts examined in an integrated framework. In terms of review methodology, the study is an integrative review in the sense defined by Snyder (2019), that is, a review whose purpose is not to cover all the articles ever published on a topic, but to assess, critique, and synthesize the literature in an integrated way so that new theoretical frameworks and perspectives can emerge. This design was preferred to a systematic review because the research question is conceptual rather than aggregative, and because the relevant scholarship is dispersed across disciplines (media and communication studies, cultural sociology, science and technology studies, human-computer interaction, and law) that use heterogeneous vocabularies and methods.

Scope and selection of the literature

The literature was selected purposively, according to its theoretical relevance to the research question, rather than exhaustively. Three bodies of scholarship were considered, namely (a) political-economy and institutional accounts of platformization and its effects on the cultural industries; (b) empirical studies of the practices through which cultural producers seek visibility on platforms and of the responses of platform companies; and (c) critical studies of algorithmic culture, algorithmic imaginaries, and platform governance. Sources were included if they met four criteria. They had to (i) be published in peer-reviewed journals, peer-reviewed conference proceedings, or academic monographs and edited volumes; (ii) explicitly address the relationship between platform infrastructures or algorithmic systems and the production, selection, visibility, or interpretation of cultural content; (iii) offer either a conceptual framework or documented empirical evidence with a clearly described method; and (iv) be written in English, the working language of the international debate on platform studies. Journalistic accounts, grey literature, and technical studies of ranking optimization that do not analyze the social and cultural implications of algorithmic systems were excluded. The time frame extends from 2010, when the politics of the term “platform” first became an object of systematic critique (Gillespie, 2010), to 2023. Classic works of social and cultural theory are cited only where they are necessary to

reconstruct the genealogy of a concept, and in every case they have been consulted in the original.

The corpus is structured in two tiers. The core corpus consists of six anchor studies, selected because each addresses, from a distinct disciplinary angle, the relationship between platform infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and cultural production. Four are conceptual, namely the theorization of platformization and of the contingent cultural commodity (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), the analysis of platform mechanisms and public values in the platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018), the account of the social power of algorithms (Beer, 2017), and the genealogy of algorithmic culture (Striphas, 2015). Two are empirical, namely a comparative panel analysis of platformization across the news, gaming, music, fashion, and video sectors (Poell et al., 2017) and a qualitative content analysis of accusations of platform “gaming,” based on a corpus of 105 news articles and seven platform guideline documents coded through a grounded-theory approach (Petre et al., 2019). The update corpus consists of peer-reviewed studies published from 2019 onward, identified through forward citation tracking of the anchor studies and through keyword searches in bibliographic databases and Google Scholar (using combinations of terms such as “algorithmic visibility,” “platformization,” “cultural production,” “recommender systems,” “folk theories,” “shadowbanning,” and “platform governance”). From the results, studies were retained if they met the inclusion criteria and if they extended, qualified, or challenged the arguments of the core corpus with respect to at least one of the four analytical moments of the research question.

Selection of the empirical cases

The empirical cases discussed in the article are not original data, but illustrations documented in the primary studies. They were included according to three criteria. Each case had to (i) be reported in a peer-reviewed primary study with sufficient empirical detail to allow a precise attribution of facts and interpretations; (ii) contribute, together with the other cases, to covering cultural sectors characterized by different histories and different degrees of platform dependence (journalism, digital games, music, fashion and influencer culture, online video, and book retail); and (iii) illuminate at least one of the four analytical moments of the research question. On this basis, the analysis discusses the data-driven production model of BuzzFeed, the soft-launch and monetization model of the free-to-play game Candy Crush Saga, the datafication and playlist curation of music streaming, the affiliate economy of fashion influencers, the working conditions of online video creators, the three “gaming” controversies analyzed by Petre et al. (2019), and the #AmazonFail episode analyzed by Striphas (2015). The cases are illustrative rather than

representative, and their function is to anchor the conceptual argument in documented processes, not to support statistical generalization.

Synthesis and interpretation procedure

The synthesis proceeded in three stages. In the first, deductive stage, each source was read and coded against an analytical matrix that crossed the three levels of the model proposed by Nieborg and Poell (2018), markets, governance, and infrastructure, with the four analytical moments of the research question, production, selection, visibility, and reinterpretation. In the second, comparative stage, the coded material was compared across sectors and across the two tiers of the corpus, in order to identify recurring patterns, divergences, and points on which the post-2019 literature extends or qualifies the arguments of the anchor studies. In the third, abductive stage, the recurring patterns were reformulated as analytical propositions that are not stated as such in any of the individual sources, and the relations among these propositions were articulated in the integrated model presented in the Discussion.

Two rules guided the presentation of the results. First, all empirical details (case descriptions, corpora, and quantitative information such as article counts) are attributed to the primary studies in which they were documented, and every source is cited directly rather than through secondary citation. Second, the interpretive contribution of the author is kept distinct from the findings of previous studies. Each subsection of the Results first reports what the literature shows and then, in a clearly signposted closing paragraph, states the proposition that the author derives from it. Consistent with the status of a conceptual article, the “results” are therefore analytical propositions generated by the synthesis, not empirical findings. The study involves no human or animal subjects and no collection of personal data.

Results

This section presents the results of the synthesis in three steps, which correspond to the analytical moments of the research question. The first concerns the production and selection of content, the second the strategies of visibility and their regulation, and the third the reinterpretation of algorithmic systems by producers and users. In each step, the reconstruction of the literature is followed by a proposition that expresses the author’s analytical reading.

Datafication, commodification, and selection, from contingent commodity to contingent visibility

The first of the three mechanisms through which platforms reorganize cultural production is datafication. In their overview of digital publishing,

Poell et al. (2017) describe it 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 and 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). Once the content has been published, engagement, social referrals, comments, search rank, and page views are systematically tracked and used to determine whether it is profitable to further edit and promote the content or to halt the 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 distinguish two complementary senses of "contingent." The first is contingency as dependence, whereby cultural producers become increasingly "contingent on" a small group of dominant platforms, a relation the authors term platform dependence. The second is 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 in Nieborg's contribution to the 2017 panel of the Association of Internet Researchers, illustrates the second sense particularly well. A title such as Candy Crush Saga is first launched in selected national app stores, in 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). In this model, the operative rule of the industry becomes the identification and monetization of a small, highly profitable group of paying users, whom developers call "whales" (Nieborg, 2015).

A structurally analogous datafication process emerges in Prey's contribution on the platformization of popular music (Poell et al., 2017). Prey observes that streaming turns every moment of music listening into data, since every volume adjustment, every skip, every artist search, and every abandoned listening session communicates something about a user's musical taste. This datafication of listening enables practices such as the A/B testing of alternative

versions of the same track, for instance by comparing listener retention when a song's "hook" is placed within the first thirty seconds with retention when it arrives only at the first chorus. Such practices extend the modular potential of popular music and turn songs into rearrangeable objects calibrated to the perceived taste profiles of listeners (Poell et al., 2017). More recent research has shown that, in music streaming, selection is neither purely editorial nor purely algorithmic. Studying the curators of streaming playlists, Bonini and Gandini (2019) describe a hybrid form of gatekeeping in which editorial judgment and algorithmic data are combined, which they term "algo-torial." Prey (2020) locates a central form of platform power precisely in this curatorial capacity to determine which music is surfaced through playlists, while showing that such power is exercised in negotiation with other powerful actors in the music industry, notably the major record labels.

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 tendency toward accumulation and proprietary concentration that Srnicek (2016) terms platform capitalism, a regime in which platforms extract and control data as a key resource and benefit from network effects that tend toward monopoly. In this regime, 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) had argued that the networked information economy might weaken the dominance of the industrial mode of information production in favor of decentralized, non-market forms of social production. Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4279) revisit this hypothesis critically and conclude that the dominance of the major platforms points in the opposite direction, toward commercialization and corporate concentration.

The third mechanism, selection, is the most directly relevant to the research question, since it concerns the processes through which some content is made visible and other content is not. Beer (2017) observes that the social power of algorithms unfolds along at least three distinct yet interconnected lines. The first concerns the entanglement of human and machine agency in decision-making, 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 concerns the role of algorithms in shaping institutional, organizational, and commercial decision-making. In this vein, Yeung (2017) introduces the notion of the "hypernudge" to describe how big-data systems configure the choice environments of users in ways that are highly personalized, continuously updated, and pervasive. The third line concerns the politics of algorithmic sorting, classification, and prediction, that

is, the capacity of platform systems to decide what matters, what should be more visible, and 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 hypothesis of the "filter bubble" advanced by Pariser (2011) becomes relevant, according to which personalization systems progressively narrow the range of information and cultural experiences to which a user is exposed, reinforcing consolidated patterns rather than favoring encounters with heterogeneous content. Seaver (2019) adds a further dimension to this picture. On the basis of fieldwork among the developers of recommender systems, he shows that these systems are increasingly designed and evaluated according to their capacity to retain users, and that they can therefore be analyzed as traps, devices built to capture attention rather than simply to satisfy pre-existing preferences.

Understanding the power of algorithms in the selection of cultural content thus requires avoiding two symmetrical errors. The first consists in treating the algorithm as a self-contained technical object, detachable from the social context that produced it and that continually shapes its redesign. Neyland and Möllers (2017) warn against this error when they argue that algorithmic power should be understood as an outcome of the associations in which algorithms are embedded rather than as an intrinsic property of code. The second error consists in underestimating the capacity of such systems, precisely because of their opacity, to produce real and lasting effects on the distribution of cultural visibility through the aggregation of proceduralized choices. Pasquale (2015) captures these effects when he describes a society in which authority is increasingly exercised through secret algorithms that escape public scrutiny. The tension between technical opacity and tangible material effects frames the practices through which cultural producers attempt to render themselves "algorithmically recognizable" (Gillespie, 2017), which are examined in the next subsection.

In the reading proposed here, the literature reviewed in this subsection supports an extension of the notion of contingency. Nieborg and Poell (2018) apply it to the cultural commodity, but the evidence from journalism, games, and music suggests that it applies equally to the visibility of that commodity. Under editorial logic, the decision to publish, broadcast, or programme a work produced a form of visibility that was relatively stable and attributable to identifiable decision-makers. Under algorithmic logic, visibility becomes a provisional status, granted on the basis of datafied performance, continuously recalculated, and exposed to changes in ranking criteria that producers neither control nor observe. Hybrid forms of curation (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Prey, 2020) do not contradict this tendency, since the editorial judgment they retain is itself exercised within the metrics and the infrastructures of the platform.

Proposition 1. *Under algorithmic logic, cultural visibility becomes contingent visibility, a provisional and revocable status whose conditions are set unilaterally by platforms and continuously recalculated on the basis of datafied performance.*

Producer practices of visibility optimization and platform paternalism

Once the structural architecture of algorithmic selection has been reconstructed, attention must turn to the level of practice. How do cultural producers respond to the need to become visible within ranking systems that remain largely opaque? The panel coordinated by Poell et al. (2017) offers an 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 the degree of platform dependence of each field.

In the domain of news journalism, Poell observes that digital publishers do not merely monitor engagement metrics passively but develop production strategies oriented toward maximizing them. In the case of BuzzFeed, however, the evaluation of traffic data is not mechanical, 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 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. This occurs 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. Contrary to the meritocratic rhetoric that accompanies it, Duffy argues, the influencer system does not constitute a genuinely open environment, but rather a technologically mediated reproduction of social hierarchies already characteristic of the women's magazine and advertising industries (Poell et al., 2017). In the domain of online video, finally, Cunningham observes that creators operate within an algorithmic culture that imposes regular upload rhythms and commits them to increasing workloads across multiple platforms. Authenticity and community, built through a constant dialogue 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 (Poell et al., 2017).

Subsequent research has shown how deeply producers internalize the logic of these systems. In her study of Instagram influencers, Cotter (2019) shows that they approach algorithmic visibility as a game whose rules must be inferred, and that they distinguish between strategies they regard as forms of

authentic connection with followers and tactics they regard as merely simulated, thereby reproducing in their own practice the normative vocabulary of the platform. O'Meara (2019) analyzes engagement pods, groups of influencers who agree to like and comment on each other's posts in order to increase their visibility, and interprets them as a collective practice of resistance to the unremunerated labor that the platform requires of producers. These studies indicate that optimization is not an anomaly within platform cultural production, but a structural requirement of it.

The contribution of Petre et al. (2019) offers the most systematic analysis of how such practices are recoded by platforms. The authors conduct a qualitative content analysis, following a grounded-theory approach, of a corpus of 105 news articles and seven official documents (press releases and user guidelines) concerning three paradigmatic episodes. The first is 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. The second is Facebook's December 2017 announcement of a crackdown on "engagement bait," that is, content specifically designed to elicit likes, shares, and comments. The third is the April 2017 shutdown, at Instagram's request, of the bot service Instagress, which automated likes and comments on behalf of subscribed users (Petre et al., 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 committed to safeguarding the values of authenticity and community integrity, while condemning in strongly moralized terms the 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 structure both the journalistic narratives and the official communications analyzed. 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. Google describes its unpaid search results as "organic," and, in the communications analyzed by the authors, the penalty imposed on Rap Genius was justified by the presence of "unnatural links" to the site (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. Drawing on Lakoff's (1995) analysis of the moral metaphor of the family, the authors read this cluster as an enactment of the "Strict Father" model, a figure of moral authority who demands obedience and punishes disobedience (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 this analysis lies 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 demand from content producers 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. It consolidates the reputation of platforms as meritocracies in which the best content naturally rises to the top with the help of a sophisticated yet impartial algorithm, and it serves their economic interests, since it implies 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, but amplify pre-existing material inequalities among categories of creative labor. Rap Genius, supported by substantial venture-capital funding, was able to devote significant resources to identifying and removing the 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 to mutual-engagement pods. Although not officially banned, this practice 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). Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4279) offer a structural explanation of this unevenness, since multisided market configurations tend to produce strong winner-take-all effects that leave individual producers little room to mitigate imbalances or negotiate more favorable conditions. More recent evidence confirms that the burden of algorithmic uncertainty is socially stratified. Interviewing creators from marginalized communities, Duffy and Meisner (2023) show that experiences of algorithmic invisibility, such as suppressed reach and demonetization, are perceived as falling disproportionately on creators who are already disadvantaged, and that these creators experience platform governance as arbitrary and opaque.

In the reading proposed here, these studies reveal a structural contradiction that the notion of platform paternalism describes at the level of discourse but that also has a material dimension. Platforms need producers to optimize, since the supply of content calibrated to their metrics is the condition of their economic model, yet they reserve for themselves the right to decide,

case by case and after the fact, when optimization becomes manipulation. The legitimacy of a visibility practice therefore does not depend on its intrinsic characteristics, but on the position of the actor who adopts it and on its compatibility with the commercial interests of the platform. The case of Rap Genius, which could afford to repair its standing, and that of independent creators, who could not, shows that the same boundary produces different consequences depending on the economic, social, and symbolic capital available to producers.

Proposition 2. *Optimization practices are subject to an asymmetric legitimacy, since platforms structurally require them while reserving the unilateral power to condemn them, and the costs of the shifting boundary between optimization and manipulation fall disproportionately on producers with fewer resources.*

Algorithmic imaginaries, folk theories, and organized opacity

Alongside strategic optimization, the reception and interpretation of algorithmic systems by producers and users constitutes the fourth analytical moment of the research question. Bucher (2017) introduces the notion of the algorithmic imaginary to describe the ways in which people think about what algorithms are, what they should be, and how they function, and she shows that these imaginaries are productive, since they shape the behavior of users and, through it, the data on which algorithms operate. DeVito et al. (2017) analyze the folk theories, that is, the informal and often fragmentary explanations, through which Twitter users interpreted and resisted the introduction of an algorithmically curated timeline. Among producers, these interpretive activities take collective forms. Bishop (2019) describes the “algorithmic gossip” circulating among YouTube beauty vloggers and the industry intermediaries who advise them, a body of shared theories and strategies about the recommendation system that informs content decisions and that, as Bishop argues, tends to reinforce particular norms of what counts as successful content.

Research published after 2019 has extended these insights to new platforms and contexts. Siles et al. (2020) show that Spotify users in Costa Rica develop distinct folk theories of the platform’s recommendations, imagining it either as a social entity with which a personal relationship is established or as a rational, impersonal system, and that these theories orient how they enact their own data. Karizat et al. (2021) find that TikTok users elaborate folk theories according to which the “For You” algorithm suppresses content associated with particular social identities, and that they engage in forms of algorithmic resistance aimed at counteracting this perceived suppression. Myers West (2018) had already shown that users who experience

content moderation, from post removal to account suspension, develop their own theories to explain what happened, largely because platforms provide little or no explanation of their decisions. Savolainen (2022) treats discussions about shadow banning as a form of algorithmic folklore and argues that, in the absence of clear rules and consistent enforcement, users are unable to form reliable expectations about platform governance. Cotter (2023) takes this argument a step further. Analyzing the controversy over shadowbanning on Instagram, she describes “black box gaslighting,” the practice through which a platform uses its epistemic authority over its own systems to discredit the knowledge claims of users, thereby undermining their capacity to know algorithms independently and to criticize them credibly.

In the reading proposed here, these studies suggest that opacity should not be understood merely as a technical limitation, deriving from the complexity of machine-learning systems, or as a matter of trade secrecy. It also functions as an organized resource of power. Because platforms retain the exclusive authority to confirm or deny how their ranking systems work, the uncertainty of producers is converted into dependence. Producers must keep investing in interpretive labor, through gossip, folk theories, and experimentation, in order to remain visible, while the knowledge they produce can always be dismissed as mere speculation. Interpretation, which the research question treats as the last moment of the process, thus feeds back into production and selection, since the theories that producers develop about the algorithm shape the content they create and, through it, the data that train the algorithm itself (Bucher, 2017; Airoidi, 2022).

Proposition 3. *Algorithmic opacity operates as an organized resource of power, through which platforms retain the epistemic authority to define how visibility is allocated, convert the uncertainty of producers into dependence, and render their critiques discreditable as folk theory.*

Discussion

The Results have shown that the power of platforms over the selection of cultural content is exercised through technical mechanisms (datafication, commodification, algorithmic ranking), through discursive practices of legitimation such as platform paternalism, and through the management of opacity. The Discussion moves from these findings to their interpretation in four steps. It first examines the discursive power of the very notion of the algorithm, then presents the integrated model that constitutes the main contribution of the article, discusses its governance implications, and finally considers the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

The discursive power of the notion of the algorithm

Beer (2017) invites us to distinguish between the power of algorithms as such, that is, 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 and contributes to the construction and legitimation of particular social rationalities. In a Foucauldian vein, Beer argues that algorithms produce truth in a twofold sense. They do so through their material interventions, since classifications and predictions become operative truths about risk, taste, merit, and relevance. They also do so through discursive interventions, since the mere evocation of the term “algorithm,” irrespective of its actual technical functioning, carries a persuasive weight that suggests neutrality, objectivity, and efficiency and helps to normalize the expansion of computational systems within organizational and social structures (Beer, 2017, pp. 8–9).

This discursive dimension is explored in fine-grained fashion by Striphas (2015). Taking up the notion of algorithmic culture introduced by Galloway (2006), Striphas reconstructs the progressive transfer to computational processes of the classificatory work traditionally performed by culture, namely the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas. 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. An employee of Amazon’s French office mistakenly altered the value of a single database attribute, from “false” to “true” for the field labeled “adult,” triggering the 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). Amazon publicly attributed the episode to a cataloguing error (Striphas, 2015, p. 396). The case demonstrates how apparently technical decisions, such as 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 intentions or awareness of the human operators involved.

Through a lexical reconstruction inspired by the keywords method of Williams (1983), Striphas (2015) identifies three terms, information, crowd, and algorithm, as the semantic core around which the concept of culture has been reorganized over the past 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), takes a decisive turn with mid-twentieth-century cybernetics, which detaches information from any human recipient and places human beings and machines under a single computational logic (Striphas, 2015, p. 400). The history of the term “crowd,” from the negative nineteenth-century notion of the irrational mass to

the positively valorized contemporary notions of crowd wisdom and collective intelligence, shows how concepts once laden with suspicion have been converted into legitimating resources for recommendation systems, which present themselves as an expression of the democratic preferences of users (Striphas, 2015, pp. 401–402, 407). The history of the term “algorithm,” finally, 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 the “cipher,” encryption and the concealment of meaning (Striphas, 2015, pp. 403–405), reveals a long-standing tension between revelation and concealment. Contemporary algorithmic culture reproduces this tension, since the algorithms of dominant platforms are presented as instruments of transparent, meritocratic access to cultural relevance while remaining closed to external verification (Striphas, 2015, p. 407).

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, but the progressive privatization of the process that determines what counts as culturally relevant, a process that was once, however imperfectly, open to public contestation within a hierarchical system organized around newsrooms and editors (Striphas, 2015, p. 406). Revisiting critically the classic conception of culture as a principle of authority formulated by Arnold (1869/1993), Striphas argues that companies such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook become, notwithstanding their populist and democratizing rhetoric, “the new apostles of culture” (Striphas, 2015, p. 407). This expression resonates directly with the notion of platform paternalism discussed above and with the findings on organized opacity, since in all three cases a private actor claims cultural authority while presenting it as the neutral outcome of a technical procedure.

Toward an integrated model of the double register of algorithmic power

The literatures examined in this article have usually been discussed separately. Nieborg and Poell (2018) and Poell et al. (2022) offer an institutional and political-economy account of platform dependence. Petre et al. (2019) analyze the discourse through which platforms condemn “gaming.” Beer (2017) and Striphas (2015) investigate the discursive power of the notion of the algorithm. Bucher (2017), Bishop (2019), and Cotter (2023) examine the interpretive practices of users and producers. The three propositions formulated in the Results allow these strands to be connected in an integrated model, which the article proposes to call the double register of algorithmic power.

The first register is material. It consists in the capacity of platforms to datafy cultural production, to rank and recommend content, and thereby to

allocate visibility as a contingent and revocable status (Proposition 1). The second register is discursive. It consists in the capacity of platforms to define the terms in which visibility is understood and judged, that is, to establish what counts as organic or artificial, authentic or manipulative, and to invoke the algorithm as a neutral and meritocratic arbiter (Beer, 2017; Petre et al., 2019; Striphas, 2015). The originality of the model lies in the claim that the two registers are not parallel but mutually reinforcing, and that they are connected by a circuit of legitimation composed of four moments. First, the opacity of ranking systems generates uncertainty among producers. Second, uncertainty pushes producers toward optimization strategies and interpretive work, through folk theories and gossip, which are necessary to remain visible (Proposition 3). Third, platforms recode the most visible of these strategies as illegitimate manipulation, through a moralized vocabulary that presents the platform as the guardian of authenticity (Proposition 2). Fourth, this recoding strengthens the epistemic and moral authority of the platform, which can continue to modify its ranking criteria without external accountability and thus reproduces the opacity from which the circuit began.

The model qualifies the answer to the question posed in the title of the article. Who decides what we see is neither the code alone, as technicist readings imply, nor the deliberate choices of platform managers alone, as some critical accounts suggest. It is the circuit as a whole, in which technical operations and discursive definitions sustain each other. This reading is consistent with Airoidi's (2022) argument that algorithms are themselves socialized through the data they learn from, since in the circuit described here the data on which ranking systems operate are already shaped by producers' interpretations of those systems. It is also consistent with the evidence of hybrid gatekeeping in music streaming (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Prey, 2020), which shows that human judgment survives within platforms, but in a position subordinate to their metrics and to their definitions of relevance. Finally, the model specifies the mechanism through which the inequalities documented by Duffy (Poell et al., 2017), Petre et al. (2019), and Duffy and Meisner (2023) are reproduced. Because the discursive register allows platforms to decide after the fact which practices are legitimate, actors with greater resources can absorb and repair the consequences of a shifting boundary, while less-resourced producers bear the cost of every redefinition.

Implications for platform governance

The model also has implications for governance. Van Dijck et al. (2018) locate the problem of the algorithmic selection of cultural content within a structural tension between public values and private interests, and argue for a form of platform governance that coordinates three categories of actors. Market actors must be held accountable for design and algorithmic

choices with significant public consequences, civil-society actors must be able to produce independent scrutiny and to represent the interests of weaker categories of users and producers, and governmental institutions are called upon to intervene with regulatory tools that go beyond the voluntary self-regulation of platforms. Gorwa (2019) maps the field of platform governance by distinguishing among self-governance, external governance by states, and co-governance arrangements, and Gorwa et al. (2020) show that the automation of content moderation tends to make decisions even more opaque and to obscure their political character behind an appearance of technical neutrality. Van Dijck (2021) argues that the integration of platform ecosystems requires holistic, principle-based regulation rather than sector-by-sector intervention.

In the European Union, the Digital Services Act has introduced obligations that bear directly on the material register of algorithmic power. Online platforms that use recommender systems must set out in their terms and conditions the main parameters used in those systems and any options available to users to modify them, and very large online platforms must offer at least one option for each of their recommender systems that is not based on profiling (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, 2022, Arts. 27 and 38). In the light of the model proposed here, such transparency obligations are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for accountable governance of cultural visibility. They address the disclosure of ranking parameters, but they do not by themselves settle who has the authority to define the boundary between legitimate optimization and manipulation, that is, the discursive register. Petre et al. (2019, p. 10) argue that the underlying problem is not the existence of such a boundary, which however historically shifting must nonetheless be drawn, but the fact that it continues to be defined and enforced unilaterally by platform companies. Their call for the democratization of the deliberative process through which definitions of algorithmic manipulation are formulated, involving in particular the cultural producers whose livelihoods depend on algorithmic visibility (Petre et al., 2019, p. 10), can be read, in the terms of the model, as a proposal to open the discursive register to public contestation. Whether the transparency and risk-assessment mechanisms introduced by recent regulation will make such contestation possible is a question that empirical research will have to answer.

Limitations and directions for future research

The study has several limitations. First, as a conceptual article it does not rely on original data, and the three propositions and the integrated model are analytical constructs that require empirical testing. Second, the selection of the literature was purposive and theory-driven rather than systematic. Although explicit criteria were applied, other selections could foreground

different dimensions of the phenomenon, and the review does not claim to be exhaustive. Third, the corpus is limited to English-language scholarship and is weighted toward studies of North American and European platforms and producers. The work of Siles et al. (2020) indicates that algorithmic imaginaries vary across social and geographical contexts, and the model may need to be adapted to contexts in the Global South and to non-Western platforms. Fourth, several of the empirical cases discussed date from 2009 to 2018. Platforms and algorithmic systems change rapidly, and the diffusion of short-video recommendation feeds and of generative artificial intelligence may alter the forms of optimization and the boundaries of legitimacy described here.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. The propositions could be operationalized in qualitative studies, through interviews and digital ethnography, with cultural producers in different sectors and national contexts, including the Italian one, in order to examine how contingent visibility and asymmetric legitimacy are experienced in practice. The discursive register could be investigated through longitudinal analyses of platform communications, guidelines, and transparency reports produced under the Digital Services Act, to assess whether regulatory pressure changes the vocabulary through which platforms define legitimate visibility. Algorithmic audits could be combined with studies of folk theories, in order to compare what producers believe about ranking systems with what can be observed about their behavior. Finally, the spread of content generated or assisted by artificial intelligence opens a new frontier for the boundary between optimization and manipulation, and offers a timely case for testing whether the circuit of legitimation described here is reproduced, transformed, or interrupted.

Conclusions

In light of the argument developed in this article, it is possible to return to the research question posed at the outset. The algorithmic logic of platforms transforms cultural production along four interconnected levels. 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 or subordinated, by computational ranking that presents itself as neutral and meritocratic while reflecting design choices oriented by specific commercial interests (Gillespie, 2014; Beer, 2017). At the level of visibility, cultural producers develop strategic optimization practices that platforms recode, through a strongly moralized vocabulary, as illegitimate manipulation, generating a dynamic of platform paternalism that amplifies pre-existing

inequalities among producers (Petre et al., 2019; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). At the level of reinterpretation, 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 distinction between technical error and political choice risks becoming indiscernible for those who experience its consequences (Striphas, 2015; Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2023).

Beyond this reconstruction, the article has advanced three propositions on contingent visibility, asymmetric legitimacy, and organized opacity, and an integrated model of the double register of algorithmic power, in which the material capacity to rank content and the discursive capacity to define legitimate visibility reinforce each other in a circuit of legitimation. 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, such as platforms, their algorithms, and datafied communities of users, but also to develop conceptual tools capable of accounting for the hybrid nature of a power that is at once technical and discursive, material and symbolic, and that is 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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