Algorithmic ~~Culture~~ Content
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During the last decade, the distribution and cre-
ation of *cultural production* has become increasingly auto-
mated and is now in the process of losing its human touch.
This development can be illustrated by the example of the
image. Most digital images, we encounter daily, are seen
through the algorithmic lens. From the algorithmic photos
we take with our smartphones to the images we see through-
out digital platforms. In essence, digital images are the
product of computational processes and neural networks
(Trhoň, 2021). With the advent of image synthesis through
machine learning, the image is now ultimately inseparable
from the (neural) network (which it was generated from).
However, even before that technological development, imag-
es were created for and consumed through (social) networks.
Accelerated by the pandemic, our lives are now constantly
mediated through digital images, that are shared online and
filtered by algorithms (Cubitt et al., 2021).

The Algorithmic Internet

The impact of artificial intelligence on our (vi-
sual) culture is deeply linked to the relationship between
machine learning models and the Internet, as software en-
gineer Christina Lu points out in her essay *The Algorithmic
Internet: Culture, capture, corruption.*

Lu (n.d.) describes the success of AI systems being
attributed to the notions of *scale and ease, with scale*
referring to the significant amount of information that is
needed to train massive machine learning models. With this
much information available on the web, it could be argued
that the so-called *foundation models* are essentially *in-
ternet-based.* Fed by the Internet, these algorithms are
implanted back into the web, changing the way we act online
to the point that "machine learning models … organize every
stream of information we come into contact with online: the
Algorithmic Internet" (Lu, n.d., p.2).

Thereby, the Internet functions as a "networked
mass communication apparatus" (Lu, n.d., p.2), not ex-
clusively but most visibly through social media, where
information from any domain is immediately available and
presented in the feed, filtered by recommendation systems
(Lu, n.d.).
Recommendation algorithms *ease* our engagement with
content and thus change our behavior by manipulating our
desires to keep us on the platform as Lu (n.d.) describes
in her essay:

"The Algorithmic Internet seizes our base impulses and demands their immediate satisfaction, hooking us into a morphine drip of anticipated wants, infuriating takes, slick surfaces. It pries our jaw open to a deluge of information, funneling all inputs into a single collapsed channel and diluting any meaningful signal. It forces hyper-connection on a scale that does not lend itself to useful mental modeling of our world. Our senses are blown, our efforts to make sense of things become actively detrimental to our being, and we lash back or give in" (Lu, n.d., pp.2-3).

She argues that the daily amount of information we encounter on the Internet, especially on social media, confuses us to the point where we are unable to comprehend world events, since any kind of content is presented to us repeatedly without context or linearity. Consequently, our addictive behavior, enabled by algorithms, makes us endlessly scroll through this vast space of flattened and streamlined information without narrative (Lu, n.d.).

Artists & Designers as Content Creators

This development had a major influence on both the value of aesthetic productions (such as images) and their cultural producer:

Various types of cultural workers are now often referred to simply as *content creators*, regardless of their chosen medium or their role within creative productions (Eichhorn, 2022). This strongly reflects the value perception of cultural products, as media historian and theorist Kate Eichhorn summarizes:

"Whereas practices such as writing, editing, film-making, and photography were once considered highly skilled (even if they did always have amateur participants), in the age of content, the ability to produce a lot of content increasingly seems to matter more than the ability to produce high-quality cultural products" (Eichhorn, 2022, p.97).

The Internet allows individuals to now create, distribute, and receive content through social media, forming a direct relationship between the producer and the audience. As a result, media companies and individual producers now share the same broadcast dynamic. In addition to the *aesthetic relativism* created by the feed, media content, and therefore all aesthetics, are always "available on demand" (Shorin, 2018, n.p.). This development makes *aesthetic novelty* therefore far more difficult to achieve (Shorin, 2018).

Combined with the absence of additional distribution costs and the resulting increased speed of content circulation, as well as the decreasing cost of creative production, due to the availability of inexpensive and efficient tools, the value of producing images has decreased significantly as researcher Toby Shorin (2018) observed.

According to Lu (n.d.), content therefore becomes suitable for mindless consumption, which leads to a flattening of our (digital) culture. Aesthetic novelty and creativity are exchanged for repetition, recognition, and "frictionless ease funneling us into creative torpor" (Lu, n.d., p.5). Our attention spans, and with them our capacity to interact, empathize, and create in a meaningful manner, is increasingly repressed by the algorithmic feeds that dominate the Internet (Lu, n.d.).

The development of our media sphere has increased the speed of communication to a contradictory degree, where "[creative] content must be understood instantly, … must be familiar and uncomplicated, but also astonishing and new" (Self, 2018, n.p.).

Cultural producers are in crisis and increasingly unable to keep up with the demands of the industry to produce new but familiar work at lightning speed, while at the same time having to be on top of *the new* and constantly updating their skills (Porto Rocha & Float, n.d.).

Content as Commodity

With the popularization of generative, multimodal AI systems, this condition is accelerating, and it appears as though cultural production could soon be fully taken over by algorithms. Nowadays, algorithms are not only filtering content through *recommender systems*, but also populating media channels by generating content appearing on our social media feeds (Austin, 2022; Lu, n.d.).

According to Austin's (2022) observations, with the ability of producing content at a seemingly infinite scale, cultural production can be seen as the posterchild to showcase AI's recent progress. The amount of daily produced content has multiplied over the last years with an inevitable and drastic increase still to come. Furthermore, the involvement of generative algorithms is seemingly changing the future purpose of content: "Instead of an output — something to inform or entertain humans — content will increasingly be an input for our massive global culture machine, with AI distilling the existing archive into yet more content in an accelerating cycle" (Austin, 2022, n.p.). This results in generative AI systems being trained on their own output, leading to "content [that] has become

sentient and now consumes itself" (Austin, 2022, n.p.).

In a recent Twitter thread, cultural writer Kyle Chayka concludes that "[algorithmic] feeds have pushed content creators to conform to the acceptable aesthetic and cultural average; [and] A.I. generation will just automatically produce that average from the start" (Chayka, 2023, n.p.). Moreover, content will be further commodified, due to a new agent entering the realm of content production, namely the average user "who is probably less interesting or innovative even than an algorithmically popular creator" (Chayka, 2023, n.p.).

It appears as though in our modern media landscape, we are heading towards a much larger, even flatter and more meaningless synthetic cultural landscape. Generative AI systems are here to stay, and it is therefore important that artists and designers familiarize themselves with generative models, begin to cultivate more meaningful ways to interact with these systems, and find healthier means to distribute the collaborative output that results from engaging with them.

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