What Does 'Good' Curation Look Like?

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Abstract

This keynote explores the norms and governance of recommender systems on digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok, especially in relation to user-generated content. It addresses concerns about the platforms' algorithmic systems contributing to user harm and challenges the notion of platforms as mere content conduits. There are three main points: Firstly, the need to question the established definitions of recommendation-related harms and to encourage diverse frameworks for evaluating these systems. Secondly, the importance of considering long-term effects of information landscape commercialization and the potential of algorithmic recommendation for elevating historically excluded voices. Lastly, the keynote calls for greater appreciation for the nature of the 'items' being recommended, which opens up possibilities for more sophisticated discussions on normative frameworks for curation.

1. Keynote

In my keynote, I discuss the question of norms underlying recommender systems from a platform governance perspective, and I focus on commercial digital platforms hosting user-generated content operating in the cultural and entertainment space – platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and so on. Over the past few years there has been mounting concern on the part of civil society, academia, and regulators about platforms' algorithmic recommender systems, forming part of a growing trend to hold platform companies to account for the ways in which their own algorithmic systems and processes actively contribute to user harm. This challenges platform companies' historic tendency to present platforms as 'mere conduits' of content, downplaying their active curatorial role [1, 2, 3].

In this keynote, using examples from my own research and that of others, I make three main points. First, I argue that we need to resist locking in framings of recommendation 'problems', especially over the next few years as regulatory processes in the form of algorithm audits become formalised. What constitutes recommendation-enabled 'harm' is not a foregone conclusion: we must question who is being given the power to define what a recommendation problem or harm is, and who is being excluded [4]. Within the research community, we must push for there to be a diversity of frameworks and ambitious benchmarks against which to judge these systems (see [5]). Risks of filter bubbles, echo chambers, radicalization, amplification of

harmful or borderline harmful content, privacy concerns related to user profiling and targeting are some framings of 'the recommendation problem' that seem to have dominated the public debate, to varying degrees. They are also implicit or explicit in recent policies by platforms and third-party regulators. I argue that we need to approach these framings with some caution – not to discard them, but to ask what they exclude.

Second, I argue that there is value in going back to some of the older literature that highlights concerns about the over-commercialisation of the information landscape and the implications this has on which voices are being heard over the long term [6]. These are deep systemic issues that go beyond issues of the occasional amplification of discrete pieces of harmful content, coordinated disinformation efforts or radicalization rabbit holes and they require longitudinal analysis because they can only be detected, and their effects are only felt, over the long term. In my own research, I have used theories of 'algorithmic reparation' [7] and 'reparative distribution' [8] to imagine how algorithmic recommendation can be harnessed to elevate voices that have been historically excluded, drawing on lots of excellent work that has been done in relation to public service media (e.g. [9, 10]) but looking at how this might apply in commercial settings on social media platforms.

Finally, drawing on the work of Rieder [11], I argue that normative frameworks for recommendation must carefully account for the nature of the 'items' being recommended. Rieder [11] argues that our tendency to talk in terms of 'items', 'information' and 'content' has a flattening tendency, it brings "entire [human] domains into the fold of computing" but discounts all the existing frameworks and professional norms we can draw from – frameworks which would allow us to have more sophisticated normative debates about good curation. In my own research, for example, I draw from scholarship on librarianship (e.g., [12, 13, 14]) and non-punitive, speech preserving national approaches to regulating historical narratives in democratic countries [15] to (re)imagine what the responsible algorithmic recommendation of history books on the Amazon Bookstore might look like.

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