



Algorithmic Gatekeeping: How Invisible Media Systems Decide What Society Sees

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Abstract

In the digital era, the process of selecting and prioritizing information is more and more not made by human editors but by algorithmic systems. Algorithmic gatekeeping involves the automated filtering, ranking, and recommendation of various content from digital platforms such as social media, search engines, and streaming services. These systems use insight into user profiles and behaviour to decide what is shown and what is concealed. Algorithmic gatekeeping is a new form of media power. Traditional gatekeepers – journalists, editors, and broadcasters – used to make explicit editorial decisions under the guidance of professional norms and institutional expectations. On the other hand, algorithmic gatekeeping is continuous, on a massive scale, and usually not disclosed. Their ultimate goal is often to optimize engagement metrics, influencing what content gets circulated in the public sphere. This paper studies the historical and theoretical bases on which algorithmic gatekeeping is built. In so doing, the paper identifies the theoretical underpinnings of algorithmic gatekeeping as a form of infrastructure invisibility in operating public awareness, social knowledge, and collective attention.

1 Introduction

All societies use certain mechanisms that help to identify information that can be passed on to the public and that which cannot be propagated. For a long time, this was the domain of human media professionals who chose, edited, and disseminated information via print newspapers and broadcasting channels like radio and television. The only role performed by human media specialists who selected, edited, and disseminated information through newspapers, radio, and television had been changed by the accelerated development of digital communication. Today, this function is increasingly performed by algorithmic regimes operating within online platforms. The informational environment is formed by algorithms whenever individuals browse social networks, perform online searches, or watch recommended content. They register clicks, the time spent viewing a particular resource, user interactions, and preferences.

According to these data, there is a personalized content delivery by platforms, which results in unique streams of information for every user. This transition from a human form of gatekeeping to a computational one has a variety of massive social implications. The algorithms affect political awareness, cultural trends and public debate by determining the visibility of the topics. However, algorithmic systems are largely invisible compared to traditional media gatekeepers. It is rare that a user has a fair understanding of why certain content is fed to their personalized feed, while other information does not make this cut. Because exposure to certain information has an impact on belief formation, attitude shaping, and decision-making, algorithmic gatekeeping has emerged as a core characteristic of the media ecosystem within a contemporary context. It is on this basis that an understanding of system-based societies in operation can be done.

1.1 From Print and Broadcast to Digital Platforms

The concept of gatekeeping has been present throughout the history of organized communication, although the form of gatekeeping has changed drastically, especially regarding its scale. Gatekeeping in early print journalism was a conscious and apparent editorial procedure. They determined the angle and focus of the story to be published. The selection of content was influenced by editorial judgment, institutional considerations and by material considerations such as space availability. With concentration of media ownership and limited channels of publication, editorial decisions had a strong influence on public knowledge. In addition, there is the rise of radio and television in the twentieth century, which further centralized media power. Broadcasting networks were able to deliver content to mass audiences at the same time, and the decisions made regarding programming effectively dictated what large groups of people were exposed to. Regulatory frameworks, professional norms and institutional control consolidated the authority of broadcasters as the primary gatekeepers of information for the public.

For example, publishing was no longer dependent on the services of a centralized institution, and individuals could publish information independently. The digital environment made it possible for diverse voices to be heard besides greatly enhancing access to information. Upon the increase of the content, there was need for new filtering mechanisms to direct information to the right users. Thus, there was a need to develop search engines and ranking. In the modern digital landscape, platforms like social media networks and search engines serve as the primary intermediaries of information. Ranking the search results, curating feeds, and recommending content are all carried out automatically by algorithms instead of human editors who make most decisions. These systems rely on data analysis and predictive models to maximize on user engagement. This transition represents a move from institutional gatekeeping based on professional judgment to computational gatekeeping based on data and automation. The scale, speed, and opacity of algorithmic decision-making are the key factors that differentiate modern gatekeeping from its predecessors in history.

1.2 Theoretical Foundations of Gatekeeping

Some communication theories play a critical role in explaining how gatekeeping effects can be expanded through the interaction of algorithmic systems

1.2.1 Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory is a theory that describes how the flow of information is controlled before it reaches the audience. In the traditional sense, journalists and editors served as the gatekeepers of news by determining which events to report and how to report on them. In digital environments, algorithms perform a similar filtering function based on quantifiable engagement signals, as opposed to human editorial judgments. Gatekeeping therefore ceases to be a socially informed process and becomes a data-driven one.

1.2.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda setting theory argues that media influence what people think are important by giving prominence to certain areas of concern. Repeated coverage of issues promotes these issues as part of the prominent issues in public consciousness. Algorithmic systems are designed to exacerbate this effect by boosting trending or virally attractive content. Therefore, the platforms have a decisive role in influencing mass attention and the issues that are high on public agenda.

1.2.3 Framing Theory

The framing theory emphasizes on information presentation and the perception on such information. The choice of words, highlights, and setting provided has an impact on how the audience perceives the understanding of an occurrence. Indirectly, algorithmic systems impact framing effects as they foreground some particular frames over others. Thus, frames that produce greater levels of affect or behavioural responses are amplified at the expense of social and political issues.

1.3 Social Media Platforms

1.3.1 Facebook:

Facebook has a news feed algorithm that decides what to show users based on how they interact with the content, such as liking, commenting or sharing. This makes people use Facebook more. It can also spread false or provocative content quickly on Facebook. During elections people were worried that false information was spreading fast on Facebook.

1.3.2 Instagram:

Instagram uses algorithms to show users posts, reels and stories that match their interests and what they usually do on Instagram. This makes things more personal on Instagram. It can also make people compare themselves to others and affect how they see their bodies and limit what they see on Instagram.

1.3.3 YouTube:

The system of YouTube recommendation system suggest the videos to the users of what they have watched regularly or they watch regularly and amount of time they spent on YouTube. They criticize it for suggesting misleading content because it gets more views on YouTube.

1.4 News Aggregators

1.4.1 Google News:

Google News collects articles from publishers and ranks them using algorithms. This gives users access to sources. It also controls what they see on Google News. Smaller news outlets might struggle to be seen on Google News.

1.4.2 Apple News:

Apple News personalizes articles based on what users read on Apple News. This is convenient on Apple News. Possibly creating a limit to the types of point-of-view that people will interact with on Apple News.

2 Literature Review

Academic talks on algorithmic gatekeeping are based on traditional communication theories and consider the structural changes brought by digital platforms. Kurt Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory and David Manning White's newsroom studies established that human decision-makers shape and filter the flow of information. People like Tarleton Gillespie think that big online platforms are now in charge of the internet. A time ago newspaper editors decided what stories to publish. Now of human editors platforms use computer programs to decide what we see on our feeds and what we do not see. These computer programs. Rank the things we see and they even remove some things. They do all of this without us noticing. The idea of the Attention Economy, which was first talked about by Herbert A. Simon and later explained more by Tim Wu says that people can only pay attention to many things each day. Because of this companies try to get us to pay attention to them. The time we spend scrolling, watching or clicking the more money platforms can make from ads and collecting our data. Our attention is like something that can be bought and sold. There is another idea called the filter bubble, which was made popular by Eli Pariser. This is when platforms show us things that we already like or agree with. This can make our feeds feel more personal. It also means we see fewer different opinions. Over time, this can make it harder for the viewers to understand people's viewpoints and it can even make people more divided about politics.

2.1 Understanding Algorithmic Gatekeeping

2.1 How Algorithms Curate, Rank and Recommend Content

Algorithmic Gatekeeping takes place when digital platforms use computers to show what type of content will users consume. These computers are different from people who choose what to publish in newspapers and magazines. They look at data to figure out what content is relevant to users of gatekeeping. They think about things like how many people like something and how many people have liked the thing. They consider how long people look at Algorithmic gatekeeping content. What people search for is also important to gatekeeping. They think about what people interact with on the Algorithmic gatekeeping platform. Companies like Meta Platforms Google and Netflix use computers to make the experience better for users of Algorithmic gatekeeping platforms. They want to show gatekeeping content that they think people will interact with the most. They choose gatekeeping content based on how engaging it might be to users of Algorithmic gatekeeping. They do not choose it based on how important it's to society. These companies use data-based models to decide what Algorithmic gatekeeping content to focus on. This is different from media, where people make the decisions about gatekeeping content. Algorithmic gatekeeping looks at what people do to decide what Algorithmic gatekeeping content to show. This can affect what information people see and how they use these gatekeeping platforms. Algorithmic gatekeeping usually works in three steps , collecting data about users of gatekeeping, making predictions about what users of Algorithmic gatekeeping will like, ranking Algorithmic gatekeeping content automatically for users. While making things personal can be convenient and make users of gatekeeping happy it can also limit what people see and learn about Algorithmic gatekeeping. So Algorithmic gatekeeping works like editors that we cannot see and they influence what people watch what they think about politics and what they talk about with each other about gatekeeping. Algorithmic gatekeeping is a deal because it affects what content people see and interact with on these Algorithmic gatekeeping platforms. It is about gatekeeping and how Algorithmic gatekeeping works. The thing, about gatekeeping is that it is always changing and it is used by many companies like Meta Platforms, Google and Netflix to control what users see about Algorithmic gatekeeping.

2.2 Comparison: Traditional Media vs. Algorithmic Media

In conventional media frameworks, gatekeeping was done by editorial staff, reporters and organizational structures that decided which narratives were issued or transmitted. Print media, broadcasting companies, and audio channels functioned in accordance with editorial guidelines based on professional ethics and public duty. Decision-making procedures were relatively clear, featuring recognizable systems of responsibility. In contrast, algorithmic media depends on automated systems that assess and allocate content based on engagement measurements and commercial motivations. Platforms like YouTube and X largely do not handpick the majority content for exposure; rather, algorithmic systems dictate reach and prominence. This change decreases the need for direct human editorial supervision and grows reliance on data analytics. In contrast to traditional gatekeeping, which emphasized news value and editorial discretion, algorithmic gatekeeping highlights participation, user loyalty and profitability. Digital platforms function on a scale that greatly surpasses conventional methods. media, allowing immediate and worldwide content distribution. Nonetheless, this efficiency comes with a decrease in transparency. In contrast to a newspaper editor who can openly explain editorial decisions, algorithms function as “black boxes,” limiting public understanding of the criteria used for content selection and ranking. Consequently, this transition marks the point where human accountability is replaced by autonomous system execution

2.3 Algorithmic Bias and Ethical Issues

Algorithms are not always fair. They can have biases because they are based on the data they get from systems. This data can have problems like treatment of certain groups or wrong information. For example, systems that suggest things to users might prefer content that gets a reaction. This can make people only see things they already agree with and can make groups of people with ideas not talk to each other. Some groups of people might not be shown fairly. Might be stereotyped because of the way algorithms work. There are also problems with being honest and open about how data used. People do not always know how their information is collected looked at and used to decide what they see. Academics and policymakers want algorithms and the rules around them to be more open so that people can have discussions. The question is who gets to decide what is important, in the age. What ideas are built into computers. How can we make sure that computers are fair when they make decisions. These are questions because algorithmic bias is not just a technical problem. It is an political problem. Algorithmic

3 Data Analysis

- 1) The data analysis on this study is based on reviews of existing journals, websites and other media houses. There were no data collected through primary or survey or questionnaire, this research analysis strongly relies on secondary data to understanding this concept of algorithmic gatekeeping.
- 2) These analysis show that the algorithmic system have a major role in deciding what the public will see in the digital environment, these systems decide what we see through the consumer`s behavior.
- 3) These systems use behaviors such as click, likes, search quarries, time spent on each platform, this entire process is done by the system itself.
- 4) These systems can predict the trends in near future on the basis of engagement, and reach
- 5) The Algorithmic Gatekeeping systems get hold and control what we see what, what we should not see , on basis of engagement rate.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The algorithm gatekeeping means that in today, s modern world it decides what we see, what we consume. Before the rise of tech, internet the traditional form of media selected news manually but in today 's digital world the topics decision is taken with help of the engagement of audience there, likes, preferences, likes, dislikes, what we watch, what we click, what we share, what we share, the amount of time spent. The system collects this data and basis of this information they decide and predict what is going to trend in the internet in the near future. This is done on the basis of social media sites like, Instagram, You Tube, X, Facebook. The algorithm is also set up by this system with the help of our activity on social media sites. This system strongly influences our day-to-day activities, our behavior. They also shape our, opinions, choices, political views. Unlike the traditional media system which was earlier slow, took time to understand trends, analyze, shape, public opinion, the new age media does it faster. The discussion of theories, theories like Gatekeeping Theory, Framing Theory, Agenda Setting Theory.

Sometimes there are different kinds of content recommended rather than it being of what we se. Apart from all these, there is a negative side of this system, sometimes the algorithm is biased and one sided, they sometimes show, promote something that is wrong, explicit, propaganda this significantly effects on democracy, governance, country s' reputation. . The Future of algorithm gatekeeping is seeing a major shift into an AI field, in the coming future more transparency is expected in this system with new laws being implemented alongside.

FINDINGS

- 1) Algorithm systems have replaced the human work and are doing all the work by themselves
- 2) Algorithm systems track our everyday activities through social media and then understand our likes and preferences
- 3) The algorithm systems predict future trends, changes that is going to occur, like Ai field
- 4) These systems are similar to AI, they are invisible systems, who set the systems and are currently running the system.
- 5) Algorithm gatekeeping can be biased, because it can promote content to the audience of what they want, rather what they must be given advised. For ex - giving content to public about new trends in the market, rather than questioning the government about problems, crises like , unemployment, crimes, weak law and order.
- 6) This algorithm system is currently seeing a massive Change as it is seeing rise in the use of Ai tools.
- 7) The algorithm systems can be biased at times and can be manipulated by government control, propaganda.
- 8) The algorithm systems can sometimes act like hegemony, promoting something around public without thinking factually about it but promoting it because of its reach and response.

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