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Precarity, discrimination and (in)visibility: An ethnography of "The Algorithm" in the YouTube influencer industry

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ABSTRACT: YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system – known colloquially as "The Algorithm" – is a powerful character in the lives of professional and aspiring social media content creators, exerting various pressures on them in their struggles for visibility and income. This chapter brings an anthropological approach to the study of algorithms in the context of platformised creative work, seeking to understand YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system as situated in content creators' everyday lives through a triangulated examination of their *discourses*, *practices* and *experiences*. "The Algorithm" is variously understood as an omnipotent God, a black box to be opened, a mystery to be solved, a voracious machine, and an oppressor of marginalised groups. Above all, it is viewed as unknowable, impenetrable, mysterious, and inscrutable. Though creators' experiences vary significantly based on a myriad of factors, amongst my participants "The Algorithm" was universally understood as an antagonistic force, one which heightened conditions of precarity and made their working lives more unpredictable and stressful. With an ever-increasing number of people seeking careers as content creators, it is vital to interrogate the emerging and problematic sociotechnological formations that are core to this new form of labour.

YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system – known colloquially as "The Algorithm" – is a powerful character in the lives of professional and aspiring social media content creators, exerting various pressures on them in their struggles for visibility and income in the influencer industry. Every creator has tales of woe and theories to share about "The Algorithm", and every industry event has panels and discussions dedicated to it: how it works, what content it is currently preferencing, who it is discriminating against, and, most importantly, how to navigate it in order to achieve success.

Drawing on four years of ethnographic fieldwork in the London and LA influencer industries (2017-2021), I have argued (Glatt, 2022) that the introduction of algorithmic recommendation systems as a key mechanism marks an escalation of the conditions of precarity for platformised creative workers as compared to more traditional cultural industries. In addition to broader conditions of precarity, some creators are subject to *algorithmic discrimination*, which I define as a process whereby certain content, identities and positionalities within the platform economy are deprioritised from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success (Ibid.). This chapter moves from the macro to the micro, digging deeper into these findings by exploring with an anthropological lens the multifaceted and situated ways that YouTube content creators understand and respond to "The Algorithm" in their working lives, through a close reading of their *discourses*, *practices* and *experiences*.

There is a particular urgency underlying this study; with an ever-increasing number of people seeking careers in the influencer industry, it is vital to interrogate the emerging and problematic technological structures that are core to this new form of creative labour. By attending to questions of power in the "messy web" (Postill and Pink, 2012) of online and offline fieldsites where the sociotechnical assemblage of "The Algorithm" emerges, this chapter aims to make a useful contribution to critical algorithm studies, creative labour, and influencer cultures research, as well as to existing methods literature on the ethnographic research of algorithms (Bishop, 2019; Christin, 2020; Hine, 2015; 2017; Seaver, 2017).

Context: The influencer industry and rise of professional content creators

In her 2008 book *CamGirls*, Teresa Senft coined the term "microcelebrity". She defines this as "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (2013: 346). Over the past decade, what began as the informal culture of microcelebrity has developed into a popular career path and a new creative industry, dubbed by Cunningham and Craig as

"Social Media Entertainment" (2019), made up of a mature infrastructure of diverse and competing social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Twitch. Self-titled *content creators*, or *influencers*, amass online followings and monetise their content through a combination of ad revenue, brand deals, crowdfunding, merchandise sales and public appearances. The average age of influencers has gone up as the original generation has aged, but this is a decidedly young industry; most successful content creators are under the age of 35, with two of the top earning YouTubers of 2020 under the age of 10 (Berg and Brown, 2020). There are nuances and disagreements around the distinction between what constitutes a "content creator" or an "influencer" in both academia and popular culture, but broadly speaking "content creator" is a catch-all term for an entrepreneurial social media creator working across any genre and with any level of followers or income, whereas "influencer" is a term utilised by the social media marketing industry, most often describing a particular subset of high-profile professional creators (Abidin, 2015) commonly associated with female-skewing lifestyle-related genres. In this chapter I use both designations, reflecting the self-titling practices of my participants.

Whilst influencers are regularly depicted in mainstream media and journalism as frivolous, lazy and narcissistic – critiques, I found, that are often aimed at younger generations by those in power – this does them a grave disservice. During fieldwork it became clear to me that the majority of influencers are hardworking, multitalented creatives within a highly competitive industry. They possess a wide range of skills, simultaneously working as videographers, editors, photographers, on-screen talent, brand ambassadors, merchandise producers, marketers and PR reps, until they gain enough income to delegate some of the labour.

Elite influencers with multiple millions of fans can attract huge incomes; according to Forbes the top 10 highest-paid YouTube stars of 2020 earned a combined $211 million (Berg and Brown, 2020). However, these success stories fuel unrealistic expectations for the majority of hopeful content creators. According to a 2018 study by Mathias Bärtl, 97% of all aspiring YouTubers won't make it above the US poverty line of around $12,000 a year, with only 3% making a living wage (Stokel-Walker, 2018). Whilst some "microinfluencers" (those with 1000-100,000 followers) manage to defy the odds and earn a decent income – such as one tech reviewer creator I interviewed with only 10,000 YouTube subscribers who earnt £30k a year through a lucrative partnership with a gaming company – this is a metric-driven industry. A creator's number of views, likes and subscribers is a major factor in determining income, and they are on a constant treadmill to maintain, or better to increase, these figures if they hope to earn a sustainable living.

In the anthropological tradition, Miller and Slater (2000), Postill and Pink (2012), and Hine (2017) have argued that the Internet is intimately and ubiquitously woven into the fabric of everyday (offline) life, and therefore needs to be studied within this context. The turn towards a geographical place-based approach to studying Internet cultures is more aligned with traditional forms of ethnographic engagement than the purely online ethnographies that emerged in the 2000's (for example, Baym 2000; Boellstorff 2008). This project was concerned with the lived experiences of creatives within an industry context, so I conducted and synthesised participant observation in both the multi-platform social media environment and in settings where the community-industry converges, including industry events such as VidCon UK & USA and Summer in the City. Drawing on immersive participant observation of anthropologists in digital spaces (Boellstorff 2008; Hine, 2017; Lange, 2019; Nardi 2009), I became a content creator myself in addition to watching, liking and commenting on videos. Practises of becoming a YouTuber allowed me to reflect on the testimonies of my participants and gain a deeper level of understanding for their lived experiences. As Hine puts it, in "taking part for real… I experience how it feels in a visceral way that would be hard to access in an interview or observational setting" (2015: 99). The research also included formal semi-structured interviews with thirty London-based content creators. Interviewees represented a broad range of identity categories (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class and ability), and worked across a wide variety of prominent and niche genres, including lifestyle, beauty, gaming, BookTube, education, video essays, animation, LGBTQ+ and feminism, political commentary, film and tech reviews, travel, trending vlog challenges and tags, comedy, and short films. In order to counteract the overemphasis on elite creators in the existing literature, whilst some of my participants were full-time professional influencers, others were aspiring to make the leap from hobbyist to full-time; interviewees ranged widely from 2.2 million subscribers to a single solitary subscriber (myself). Despite this range, all participants emphasised that they regularly struggled with "The Algorithm" in their work.

Critical/ethnographic approaches to algorithms in cultural work

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the sociocultural dimensions of algorithms across the social sciences and humanities. Whilst taking an anthropological approach, this chapter draws on influential work from such disciplines as sociology, media and communications, critical race theory, and STS. Algorithms are an important aspect of the digital media landscape providing the foundational architecture for how social media platforms are structured, sorting and offering content to viewers according to the likelihood that they will watch it based on a variety of metrics, as well as determining which content should be (de)monetised. Rather than view algorithms simply as technological black boxes to be opened, critical qualitative approaches

understand them as "complex sociotechnical assemblages involving long chains of actors, technologies, and meanings" (Christin, 2020: 898), as "heterogeneous and diffuse sociotechnical systems… [that are] part of broad patterns of meaning and practice" (Seaver, 2017: 1), and as "material-discursive" systems that generate particular formations of power and politics in social life (Bucher, 2018).

Research into the gig economy and crowdwork on platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon Mechanical Turk has provided vital insights regarding the relationship between algorithms and labour (Chen, 2019; Gray and Suri, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018). For example, in their ethnographic research Gray and Suri argue that for low-income earners with extremely limited bargaining power, the "algorithmic cruelty" of work dependent on the "thoughtless processes" of AI has severe economic and social consequences, in contexts where platforms have little to no accountability to workers (2019: 68). However, the cultural industries have distinct histories and social formations that require their own analysis in the context of platformisation, as Duffy, Nieborg and Poell have argued convincingly (2019; 2021). Most notably, unlike the gig economy, labour in the cultural industries has long been marked by a "passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative laborer" (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 20), with cultural workers willing to endure precarious working conditions as a result (Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). Whilst a multitude of structural factors combine to form an overall system of what Duffy et al. refer to as the "nested precarities" (2021) of social media work – such as a lack of regulation and fragmented and changeable multi-platform working environments – algorithms demand scrutiny as a central mechanism with wide-ranging sociocultural and economic implications for both hobbyist and professional content creators.

In her anthropological study of sociality on YouTube Lange found that creators are subject to significant "algorithmic anxiety," drawing on an example of one creator who was unable to control his public image in the face of trolls producing highly searchable video with his name attached (2019: 197). From a cultural industries perspective, creators' income and career prospects are in large part determined by how widely their content is recommended by a platform's algorithms, but platforms rarely share information as to how their algorithms work or what factors they are preferencing. As Bishop observes, even highly successful creators "are not safe from algorithmically induced platform invisibility" (2018: 71), and consequently influencers with hundreds of thousands of subscribers will commonly still work other jobs in order to protect their financial stability. This chapter builds on and dialogues with Bishop's substantial body of critical feminist research into the role of algorithms in the influencer industry, which has addressed such topics as algorithmic gender inequalities and feminised labour

(2018), practices of *algorithmic gossip* (2019), and the sub-industry of "growth hackers" (2020).

Researchers have highlighted that algorithms pose unique challenges for researchers due to their opacity as so-called "black boxed" technologies (Christin, 2020), a characterisation that has in turn been explored, challenged and subverted by a number of qualitative researchers, who variously argue that rather than fetishize or obsess over the opacity of algorithms, understanding them as sociotechnical assemblages offers openings for creative methodological possibilities and more nuanced understandings of their impacts (Bishop, 2019; Seaver, 2017). Ethnography is particularly well suited as a methodology for examining how algorithms emerge through these sociotechnical assemblages in everyday life, able to encompass cultural practices, forms of sociality, and broader institutional factors, as well as discourses (Gray and Suri, 2019; Lange, 2019; Seaver, 2017). In his seminal piece on the ethnography of algorithmic systems, Seaver presents a vision of algorithms *as* rather than *in* culture, whereby they are "not singular technical objects that enter into many different cultural interactions, but are rather unstable objects, culturally enacted by the practices people use to engage with them" (Ibid.: 5).

Inspired by these works, I investigate not what YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system does or how it works in some objective sense, but the diverse cultural meanings and values that content creators attach to it, and how platforms, the influencer industry, and the nature of platformised creative work are constituted through these processes. Thus, in the following sections I explore "The Algorithm" through three distinct but parallel lenses: what content creators *say* about it (their imaginaries and cultural discourses), their *actions* with regards to it (their cultural practices), and how they *feel* about it (their experiences). In triangulating these three dimensions, this chapter aims to provide both a well-rounded and systematic framework for the ethnographic study of algorithms in culture, as well as a detailed account of how YouTube content creators experience and respond to "The Algorithm" in their working lives.

Algorithmic hearsay and folk theories

YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system plays a central role in the working lives of content creators, as one of the key mechanisms controlling their metrics in an industry built upon visibility. Ethnographers have highlighted that the opaque nature of algorithms makes them inherently difficult to centre in research, but the influencer industry provides a rare case study wherein algorithms are the object of such intense scrutiny and discussion that the challenge instead becomes sifting through and understanding the myriad, divergent and strongly held beliefs and practices surrounding

them. In this first of three empirical sections, I explore the prominent role of hearsay and folk theories in producing the various *algorithmic imaginaries* (Bucher, 2017) at work in constructing "The Algorithm" in the YouTube creator community. I investigate what types of narratives are shared about "The Algorithm," and discuss two prominent themes that emerged from fieldwork and interviews: firstly, its framing as an omnipotent and unknowable God, and secondly, the community detective work – or *algorithmic gossip* (Bishop, 2019) – that occurs as creators try to decipher it in order to gain some control over their work.

Pleasing the Algorithm Gods

The Algorithm was often painted by participants as an anthropomorphised mythical creature or vengeful God with the power to determine the destinies of creators. Stories of wild victories were attributed to it, such as animation reviewer Steve who had jumped from 1000 subscribers to over 70k in two short months after a video he made went viral. Working full-time in IT, Steve was grappling with what to do with his new-found but fragile success. Equally, I heard about instances of catastrophic failures blamed on the pernicious Algorithm, such as a major children's content creator who told me that her channel had gone from receiving 500k views a day to almost zero overnight as a result of changes to the recommendation of kids' content in July 2019.

Discussing a recent video that hadn't performed as well as anticipated, science creator Dr Simon Clark explained:

> "The viability of what I make is largely determined by an algorithm that nobody understands… Talking about The Algorithm is like medieval Christians talking about God – make a sacrifice by putting a clickbaity thumbnail on it and we'll pray to The Algorithm." (Simon Clark interview, October 2018)

Despite his humour, he described his work and income being at the mercy of an unknown algorithmic system as making him feel "powerless". This quote highlights the uncertainty of work for content creators, who are subject to unknown and ever-changing algorithmic and platform contexts. My participants commonly framed "The Algorithm" as an omnipotent, mysterious and unknowable being, further obfuscating the human agency and commercial interests at work on YouTube.

Algorithmic detectives and conspiracy theorists

In their attempts to understand and respond to the caprices of "The Algorithm", my participants had become algorithmic detectives. I witnessed a prime example of this in

January 2019 at my first London Small YouTubers (LSY) meeting, a community organisation for small creators (<20,000 subscribers), carrying out seemingly endless free *aspirational labour*, diligently approaching social media content creation as an investment in a future self that will hopefully be able to "do what they love" for a living (Duffy, 2017: x). The forty attendees were a diverse group and covered a broad spectrum of content genres – from music composers and film reviewers, to petfluencers and beauty vloggers – but they were all there for the same reason: to learn how to grow and monetise their YouTube channels.

The majority of the meeting was dominated by a discussion about how small creators can gain visibility in the face of a hostile Algorithm; it is the received wisdom that until creators reach a minimum of 1000 subscribers (considered to be a nano-micro-atomic-*insert-synonym-for-small*-influencer), YouTube's algorithms refuse to push their content out to anyone at all. Confronted by this significant technological barrier to entry, the group were crowdsourcing all the information they could to sway it in their favour. For example, one creator said "I've heard a rumour that it's at 60% of watch time retention that The Algorithm starts to pay attention and promote your content," and another shared that they'd heard that video tags were no longer as important as watch time, clicks, titles and thumbnails for driving traffic to content. These comments resulted in a lengthy discussion about the weighting of various metrics in determining algorithmic recommendation. Bishop (2019: 1) has described this as *algorithmic gossip*, defined as "communally and socially informed theories and strategies pertaining to recommender algorithms, shared and implemented to engender financial consistency and visibility on algorithmically structured social media platforms". She argues convincingly that taking this kind of community-industry gossip seriously provides a valuable resource for understanding the sociocultural, political and economic dimensions of algorithms.

During an interview with Steve after the meeting, I asked if the intensity with which YouTube's Algorithms had been discussed was the norm. He explained that the meeting was a typical example of the obsessive hearsay and folk theories shared between content creators, putting it:

> "No one quite knows what The Algorithm is, but everyone likes to theorise and speculate and it's basically, like if you can picture this visually, everyone would be in a room with tin foil hats on with conspiracy theories about 'I saw that YouTube did this and that means that The Algorithm is working in that way' and they will try and connect all the dots. It's like a detective film where they have post it notes all over the board and they are connecting it with string and

> they think they've figured it out but then something else happens like 'uh-oh hats back on, now this is happening.'" (Steve Simpson interview, August 2019)

Within this context of apprehensive peer-to-peer algorithmic detective work, an entire sub-industry of self-titled "algorithmic experts" or "growth hackers" has emerged in which individuals accrue social and economic capital by claiming privileged access to knowledge about how YouTube's algorithms work, as Bishop (2020) has explored in detail. Often successful and famous content creators in their own right, these are (overwhelmingly white and male) individuals who function as official and unofficial intermediaries between YouTube and content creators by selling theorisations of how to achieve algorithmic visibility on the platform (Ibid: 4). Responding to the uncertainties and anxieties that creators face, growth hackers present YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system as a black box to be opened, embracing the neoliberal logics of hard data over softer feminised forms of social media labour (Bishop, 2020; Duffy and Schwarz, 2018).

Influencer practices: Gaming The Algorithm

Algorithmic discourses inform creator practices (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017; 2018), but there is not a straightforward correlation between the two. In this section, I examine the common tactics that content creators employ in order to maximise visibility within unstable and unpredictable algorithmic contexts, and how such contexts can lead to broader shifts in the norms and genres of content creation. Whilst these tactics are commonplace, I argue that creators often find themselves in a double bind as they simultaneously try to avoid the appearance of being overly invested in metric popularity, with its connotations of inauthenticity.

Feeding the hungry algorithm

Aspiring and professional creators are on a relentless treadmill, employing sophisticated techniques to optimise their metrics within fluctuating and mysterious algorithmic contexts, or else risking the oblivion of invisibility. Common tactics include strategically timing posts to coincide with spikes in platform usage (Duffy, 2017: x), producing eye-catching thumbnails and "clickable" titles, participating in content trends and challenges, finding and sticking narrowly to a strong content niche for algorithmic visibility, scrutinising backend channel analytic data in attempts to reverse engineer YouTube's algorithms, and filming "collabs" with other content creators. Most importantly, it is common knowledge amongst content creators that YouTube's algorithms preferences channels with regular uploads; posting at least one video a week is seen as the bare minimum requirement to gain any traction, and daily uploads are

understood as the ideal for maximum visibility. All of this has led to inevitable burnout, as creators frantically compete with one another in both quantity and quality of content output.

A simple shift in how YouTube recommends content can send shockwaves through the creator community, upending how they approach making videos and even what genre of videos they make. An example of such a shockwave was in 2012 when, in an attempt to combat clickbait (content with hyperbolic or misleading titles and thumbnails, designed explicitly with the aim of attracting clicks) on the platform, YouTube shifted the primary metric for algorithmic recommendation from the number of clicks a video had to the amount of watch time (Alexander, 2019a). Where previously all content creators had to do to make a "successful" video (i.e. one that would be recommended widely to viewers) was to attract initial clicks and it didn't matter how long viewers stayed on it, suddenly creators had to pivot to make videos that would keep viewers watching for as long as possible. Whilst this move was somewhat effective in reducing the prevalence of clickbait, it also profoundly shifted the entire YouTube ecology; where most videos used to sit well below the 10-minute mark, they have gradually gotten much longer across most major genres – including vlogs, tutorials, gaming livestreams, video essays and documentaries – to the point where half hour or longer videos are now a cultural norm (Alexander, 2019b). YouTube further incentivised this transformation by allowing mid-roll ads on videos over 10 minutes, with creators receiving a cut of the revenue. On the other side of the coin, genres that were unable to adapt to become longer were all but decimated, most notably animation, which had previously been a thriving segment of YouTube culture. I heard animator panellists at VidCon UK 2019 talk about how animations are far more labour intensive to make per minute of content as compared to most other genres, and how they struggled to keep up with the video length and output that creators in other genres could achieve. Simi, a creator with 272k subscribers at the time of our interview, explained:

> "I'd spend maybe a month working every day on a video and I'd be able to get, if I'm lucky, a 10-minute animation, but probably 6 minutes. But with let's say the video where I talked about why I stopped animating, I did that in a week, and it was 20 minutes long. So for me it was just like yeah, I should probably go in that direction then." (Simi Adeshina interview, October 2018)

The pressures to create longer videos, more quickly, had driven Simi away from animation and towards gaming commentary and livestreaming. As one interviewee noted, these days it is rare to see animation channels recommended in the "trending" tab, a good indicator of what is popular on YouTube. On social media platforms, all different types of content vie for viewers' attention within the same space, and the way

that their recommendation algorithms are calibrated plays a key role in determining which genres will thrive and which will die. As prominent long-form video essayist Lindsay Ellis told The Verge in an interview, "I kind of lucked out that the algorithm eventually favored the type of content that I wanted to make" (Alexander, 2019b).

Stuck between a rock and a hard place: Algorithmic optimisation versus authenticity

There is a pervasive sense of injustice amongst many creators that YouTube's algorithms reward channels that churn out mediocre, bloated, clickbaity daily content over painstakingly crafted weekly or monthly videos, a structure that benefits large content farms and production houses over independent creators. Within this context, creators must negotiate the extent to which they are willing to shape their content to fit with what the platform is preferencing, whilst simultaneously trying to avoid the negative cultural connotations surrounding practices of "gaming The Algorithm".

The ways in which creators understand and navigate this issue varies greatly, as I found during interviews when I asked creators to what extent they embraced tactics to optimise visibility. Some said that they never made content based solely on trends and metrics, whereas others were fairly matter of fact about it as a reality of the job. Whilst some who resisted algorithmic optimisation understood themselves as having more artistic integrity and authenticity – they were being *true to themselves* and didn't want to produce content only to gain views – others were clear that visibility was the main goal of their job, and they were willing to make any content that would lead to it. The majority of creators sat somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, trying to find an equilibrium between creating content they were proud of whilst maintaining financial stability.

Several creators had some kind of self-imposed rule for balancing their output of popular versus other types of content; they "allowed" themselves a certain quota of videos that they knew would not perform well in terms of metrics, but that they really wanted to make for artistic, educational, or other reasons. Simi told me that he made "whatever he wanted" most of the time, but that every third video or so on his channel had to be a trending/popular one in order to keep his numbers up. His rationale for this was that, according to hearsay, channels that have big lulls or are too erratic in their viewing figures stop being recommended by The Algorithm. The last thing he wanted was for his channel to crash, so committing to "playing the game" for every third video seemed to him to be a reasonable compromise and acted as a kind of buoy for the channel.

It is well established in the literature on influencers that being perceived as *authentic* by viewers – whatever authenticity looks like for a particular creator-audience community – is fundamental for success in social media entertainment (for example, Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Every creator I interviewed struggled with balancing the pressures of producing content of sufficient quality and quantity to please YouTube's algorithms, whilst simultaneously performing the *relational labor* – defined by Baym as the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (2018: 19) – required to maintain the core proposition of authenticity and intimacy with their audience. Whilst it is common practise to modify content on the basis of algorithmic hearsay and folk theories, during fieldwork I found that creators who appear to only chase metric (and financial) success are often perceived as lacking the all-important authenticity required of influencers and can thus be met with disapproval by audiences. It is not simply a matter of knowing how YouTube's recommendation system works, but also of successfully striking the right balance between utilising this knowledge and maintaining the right tone with audiences. Creators can quite easily find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place if their fail to achieve this balance, satisfying neither their audience nor "The Algorithm".

Influencer experiences: Feeling The Algorithm

As Bucher puts it, when trying to understand algorithms as sociological phenomena, "what people experience is not the mathematical recipe as such but, rather, the moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate" (2017: 32). This final empirical section reflects on how it *feels* the work with (or against) YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system. I address the fear induced by the ever-present possibility of algorithmic invisibility, which is exacerbated in moments of algorithmic rupture across the platform. Beyond the precarity wrought by the "The Algorithm" on *all* creators, in this final section I turn my attention to the *algorithmic discrimination* that marginalised creators face in the influencer industry.

The fear of algorithmically induced invisibility

The overwhelming sentiments that content creators express about "The Algorithm" are anxiety, confusion, anger, and above all fear. For a full-time professional creator, the fear is that it will suddenly and inexplicably render them invisible to viewers and thus destroy their career. For a small aspiring creator, the fear is that they will never achieve the algorithmic visibility required for their career to take off.

Whilst content creators have never been on solid ground when it comes to YouTube's algorithms, their fears escalate during moments of algorithmic "rupture" on the platform (Duffy et al., 2021: 8), a significant incident of which was the first *Adpocalypse* in 2017. In response to reports of adverts appearing on terrorist content, as well as an anti-Semitic video posted by Felix Kjellberg (AKA PewDiePie), a number of high-profile advertisers pulled out of YouTube. In an attempt to appease advertisers, YouTube drastically tightened how it algorithmically identifies "advertiser-friendly" content, leading to a tidal wave of videos being demonetised and deselected for recommendation to viewers. Creators felt disempowered and angry that "The Algorithm" was making their already precarious livelihoods even more unpredictable, and heavily criticised YouTube for prioritising the interests of advertisers over the creators who provide the labour that generates value for them. As A-list creator Lilly Singh (AKA Superwoman) put it in a vlog:

> "Over the past year it has all gone to hell. There's just no pattern to what is happening in essentially my business, and it is scary and it's frustrating. I don't know *if* people see my videos, I don't know *how* people see my videos, I don't know *what* channels are being promoted, I don't know *why* some channels are being promoted more than others. There's just no answers, and that's scary to me." (Singh, 2017)

There have been multiple *Adpocalypses* since 2017, as YouTube has tried to keep a lid on a succession of controversies, from the improper recommendation of content to kids, to paedophilia concerns, to hate speech (Alexander 2019). Consequently, YouTube has struggled to balance fostering its amateur participatory culture and the interests of advertisers (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020: 9), and in recent years the platform has gradually moved away from promoting its home-grown talent in favour of Hollywood celebrities, music videos and clips from late-night shows – a safer bet for attracting advertising dollars – leaving its community of content creators feeling abandoned (Alexander 2019). Small and aspiring creators have been disproportionately punished by these changes; there is a pervasive feeling in the London Small YouTubers community that the drawbridge has been pulled up and the algorithmic barriers to entry are insurmountable. As one creator said at the "Smaller Creators" panel at Summer in the City 2019: "They can't handle the amount of content being uploaded and so they've closed off the gates for small creators. No one small is getting recommended by The Algorithm" (Glatt, 2022).

Algorithmic discrimination: The marginalisation of creators on YouTube

So far in this chapter I have discussed the heightened precarity and pressures that *all* content creators experience in the face of algorithmic recommendation systems as platformised creative workers. However, there is growing acknowledgement amongst creators, platforms, and researchers that algorithmic punishment is not evenly distributed, disproportionately impacting certain groups in line with existing social inequalities (Banet-Weiser and Glatt, 2022; Bishop, 2018; Duffy et al. 2021; Glatt, 2022; Noble, 2018).

Sociocultural and commercial inequalities across intersections of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality persist in the influencer industry and the barriers to entry are "staggeringly high" (Duffy, 2017: 223), with minority content creators excluded from elite career opportunities on a structural level. As Nicole Ocran, Co-Founder of *The Creator Union*, said in an interview for *The Guardian*, "LGBTQ+ creators, disabled creators, plus-size creators and Black and brown influencers are constantly being asked to work for free" (Tait, 2020). Throughout data collection I heard repeatedly about systemic issues of *algorithmic discrimination*, which I define as a process whereby certain content, identities and positionalities within the platform economy are deprioritised from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success (Glatt, 2022).

The 2017 *Adpocalypse* was especially problematic for LGBTQ+ creators, despite YouTube having long positioned itself as a champion for the community. At a panel titled *Not Suitable for Advertisers* during my fieldwork at VidCon USA 2018, I witnessed an impassioned discussion about the pain and frustration that LGBTQ+ creators were experiencing with their content being automatically demonetised and age restricted, with no recourse to air their grievances with YouTube beyond tagging them on Twitter. Creators had resorted to removing any reference LGBTQ+ issues in the tags and titles of their videos, to try to avoid invisibility, but this had the adverse effect of making their videos unsearchable. One of the panellists said that she had decided to leave YouTube altogether, feeling that they no longer had her interests at heart, if indeed they ever had. This example highlights the impersonal and anonymous nature of working on social media platforms, where all but the most elite creators are left to fend for themselves with partial information about how their content is recommended or demonetised and little opportunity to communicate directly with the platforms that host their work.

Creators from more marginalised identities face greater obstacles in the pursuit of sustainable careers in this industry as a result of compounding sociocultural,

technological and commercial inequalities. This bias is baked into the very design of YouTube's algorithms, supporting arguments made by intersectional technology scholars that highlight enduring and emerging forms of intersectional discrimination on the Internet (Brock, 2011; Noble and Tynes, 2016; Noble, 2018). As Banet-Weiser and I argue, YouTube's algorithms are "designed to render some content more visible than others, and the logic of this asymmetry is based on profitability" (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021: 54), a system which privileges "brand safe" creators, namely those who are white, heteronormative, middle class, and unthreatening to the neoliberal status quo. Whilst "The Algorithm" isn't understood as a friendly force in the wider influencer community-industry, for marginalised creators it is experienced as nothing short of hostile.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analysed "The Algorithm" as a multifaceted sociotechnical assemblage (Christin 2020) that emerged through ethnographic fieldwork in the YouTube community-industry. I conducted close readings of content creators' *discourses*, *practices* and *experiences* to make sense of the multifaceted and situated ways that they understand and respond to YouTube's algorithms in their working lives. "The Algorithm" is variously understood as an omnipotent God, a black box to be opened, a mystery to be solved, a voracious machine, and an oppressor of marginalised groups. Above all, it is experienced as unknowable, impenetrable, mysterious, and inscrutable. Despite the diversity of my participants, I found that they universally understood "The Algorithm" as an antagonistic force, one which made their working lives more precarious, unpredictable and stressful. In the influencer industry, where "[visibility] is a key vector of instability" (Duffy et al. 2021: 10), creators are obligated to bend themselves to the wills and shifts of algorithmic recommendation systems if they hope to build and sustain careers.

Some may wonder if ethnography is a useful method for investigating platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems, unable to get to the heart of how they "actually work", but I argue that attending to the lived experiences of content creators who navigate algorithms on a daily basis adds a powerful and complimentary dimension to more macro structural critiques of the asymmetries of power built into capitalist algorithmic systems (for example, Noble 2018; Pasquale 2015). As Seaver puts it, "ethnography roots these concerns in empirical soil, resisting arguments that threaten to wash away ordinary experience in a flood of abstraction" (2017: 2).

Platform companies "hold a perverse level of power in contemporary culture and society" (Duffy et al. 2021: 9), not least in their role as arbiters of the livelihoods of

creative workers in the burgeoning influencer industry, and critical researchers can work to hold them to account. In this regard, research into the uneven distribution of algorithmic visibility across intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality in the influencer industry has begun to emerge (Banet-Weiser and Glatt, 2022; Bishop 2018; 2021; Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022), to which this chapter contributes findings regarding the *algorithmic discrimination* that my participants reported, but more is needed. I see further research into the ways in which "The Algorithm" functions particularly as a disciplinary force for marginalised content creators, and the ways in which they are able, or not, to resist such disciplining, as a key avenue for future research.

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