Book Review

Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture

When Personalization Shapes Culture, Choice, and Taste

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Abstract

Kyle Chayka's work suggests that by way of recommendation-based social media (Instagram), video (TikTok), music (Spotify) streaming and movie/TV viewing (Netflix), and many others like them, these services do more than just tailor an individual's experience through personalization; they help decide which cultures are created, consumed, and seen. The review argues that the book's best contribution is demonstrating the relationship between recommendation via algorithms and the reduced breadth of culture being produced while at the same time acknowledging one major limitation in their analysis of causal relationship. There is

substantial research on recommender systems showing that there is indeed reason to worry about reduced cultural variety; however, the body of evidence regarding the impact of how the broadly cultural content gets distributed does vary depending on both platform and how the user's feed gets narrower, even as they seek a more personalized feed, but a lack of cultural variety can become dissatisfying. Therefore, Filterworld should be viewed as most beneficial as a model or framework for examining who determines what becomes discoverable and ultimately what types of culture become invisible.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; algorithmic recommendation; digital culture; personalization; cultural diversity; social media; AI governance

Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture opens with an observation that is obvious, though difficult to quantify: The technology that promises us personalized experiences can make all our experiences seem the same. Kyle Chayka investigates this issue in social media, video streaming services, travel, food, design and many other aspects of the way we live each day. While his thesis is not that algorithms have made individual tastes irrelevant, his argument is that recommendation systems have altered the terms upon which individual tastes develop by determining which options are visible, repetitive and economically viable. Specifically, he argues that the algorithmic ranking and incentives provided by platforms influence the style and experience of restaurants, travel destinations, retailers and other such sites and thus contribute to creating common experiences. His treatment of taste is particularly compelling. Chayka notes that while algorithms purport to be able to personalize based on individual preferences, in reality these systems rely heavily on statistical categorizations that translate past preferences into predictive models for future preferences. Platforms do not necessarily need to inform consumers specifically what they prefer in order to influence consumer preference; rather, platforms simply need to facilitate access to certain options over others. For example, studies

indicate that repeated exposure to highly similar options can lead to the user having a reduced number of different options as recommenders continually favor similar options to previously chosen options; however, empirical data regarding user-level filter bubbles is inconsistent (Areeb et al., 2023; Helberger et al., 2020). This indicates that repeated exposure narrows the options available to a user. This is also where Filterworld's greatest tension arises. The term "flatten" implies a degree of homogeneity that may not be supported by all of the evidence. While recommendation algorithms can limit exposure to different sources of information and culture, they can also enable discovery of material that consumers could not find otherwise due to lack of curation. Personalization should not solely be evaluated based on how well an individual engages with recommendations; rather, researchers emphasize that personalization should also evaluate how recommendations affect different cultures across populations (Ferraro et al., 2024). Therefore, the strongest possible reading of Chayka's position would likely be that recommendation systems alter cultural selection processes from human curators located throughout society to platform-driven systems of visibility.

In developing this point further using the concept of economic incentives within the context of influencers, Chayka illustrates why recommendation systems can function in ways that limit creativity. As soon as visibility becomes measurable in terms of likes, shares, clicks and/or watch time, creators begin to view the platform as a gatekeeper. Thus, Chayka explains, this can lead to what he refers to as algorithmic anxiety: Creators and consumers alike become anxious about anticipating systems that continuously evolve. As a result, there emerges a feedback loop wherein culture is created both for audiences and for the recommendation system itself. This is a significant contribution as it demonstrates that even when algorithmic influence occurs indirectly (i.e., via voluntary adaptation), it can still significantly affect how people create and consume culture.

Similarly, Chayka's treatment of regulatory responses is equally important since he does not view recommendation algorithms as merely technological issues. Instead, Chayka examines questions related to transparency, platform concentration and European regulations regarding governance of systems that shape everyday cultural exposures. These types of questions have become increasingly relevant given increasing attention to the social impacts associated with recommendation systems, such as risks to diversity, autonomy and public deliberation (Helberger et al., 2020; Reid, 2024).

For practitioners, educators, cultural institutions, and platform decision-makers, this suggests asking which kinds of content recommendation systems make easiest to discover, whether personalization limits exposure to unfamiliar material, and how ranking incentives affect creators. Balancing personalization with exposure diversity can therefore be treated as a design and governance question rather than only an engagement objective.

The term diversity also needs to be separated into different levels. It can refer to the range of content an individual encounters, the variety of sources represented by a platform, the diversity of cultural production, or the overall diversity of culture at an aggregate level. These forms of diversity do not necessarily move together, so narrower exposure for an individual does not by itself demonstrate broader cultural homogenization.

Filterworld is arguably at its best when it prompts readers to think about visibility rather than solely about personalization. The book establishes a clear shift in cultural power. Choices that were previously shaped by individual discovery, editors, critics, friends, etc., are now being influenced by systems that have been optimized by private platforms. The long-term value of Filterworld will lie in providing evidence of that shift and in prompting us to ask ourselves: If an algorithm shapes what is easiest for a user to see and/or access in terms of information, how much of our culture is still shaped by our own preferences (choice) versus how much of it is

shaped by the designs of algorithms? The book is particularly valuable for readers in digital culture, platform governance, media, marketing, technology policy, and higher education who want to examine how visibility and choice are organized by platforms. Its broad claims about cultural homogenization are most persuasive when considered alongside the more nuanced empirical evidence on recommender systems.

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