DIGITAL CONTROL AND THE MANIPULATION OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract

The article provides a socio-philosophical analysis of how the role of social networks in the global communication system has radically changed since the beginning of the 21st century, transforming from traditional means of information exchange into a complex technological infrastructure that shapes the modern “platform society” and controls social consciousness. At the center of the research lies the dual nature of social networks – on the one hand, creating opportunities for free communication by democratizing information exchange, and on the other hand, the problem of establishing new types of data-driven digital control mechanisms over users' activities. The article reveals that the information flow is not sorted chronologically, but rather through an "algorithmic curation" system that operates based on tracking user behavior and possesses the characteristics of a “black box.” The real social and political consequences of these processes are examined using the example of the “Cambridge Analytica” scandal, substantiating how the “microtargeting” method aimed at the psychological characteristics of users manipulates political views. Additionally, the article analyzes how the “attention economy” model, aimed at maximizing attention retention, and the phenomenon of “echo chambers,” which isolates users from alternative viewpoints, narrow the individual's worldview. It is shown that under such conditions of algorithmic persuasion, personal identification in the digital environment (“performative identification”) is becoming a secondary process under the influence of audience expectations and algorithmic effects. In conclusion, it is emphasized that human cognitive independence, cognition, and decision-making processes are increasingly falling under the influence of algorithmic control, putting forward the assertion that this situation requires a deeper study of the impact of artificial intelligence on human thinking.

Keywords: *social networks, digital control, manipulation, algorithmic curation, data-driven control, echo chambers, attention economy, performative identification, microtargeting, algorithmic persuasion.*

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, social networks have become an essential component of the global communication system. As a result of the development of Internet technologies, the forms of communication between people have radically changed, and the speed and scale of information exchange have sharply increased. If in traditional mass media, communication was organized mainly in a one-way form - that is, as a relationship between the subjects producing information and those receiving it, social networks fundamentally changed this model. Now, users have become active subjects who not only consume information but also produce and distribute it. In recent years, the sharp increase in the number of social network users has further strengthened the role of these platforms in social life. According to international statistical data, by 2024, the number of social network users worldwide exceeded 5 billion. For instance,

while the number of monthly active users on the Facebook platform has approached 3 billion, billions of users are also active on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Data Reportal, 2024).

These platforms have become an important arena for political debates, economic advertising, cultural exchange, and processes of social mobilization, forming a new social environment called the “platform society” in modern society (Van Dijck et al., 2018). However, social networks perform a dual function in modern society: on the one hand, they democratize communication; on the other hand, as a complex data infrastructure (Zuboff, 2019), they form new types of digital control mechanisms over users' activities. The purpose of this article is to analyze the mechanisms of algorithmic control systems in social networks for influencing and manipulating individual identity and social consciousness.

2. Methodology

The research utilized socio-philosophical and critical analysis methods to study the role of social networks in the modern digital communication environment. In particular:

- **Theoretical analysis:** Conceptual models such as “algorithmic curation” (Gillespie, 2018) and the “attention economy” (Davenport, Beck, 2001) were analyzed to explain the sorting and presentation of information through social networks.
- **Case Study method:** To reveal the real impact of digital control and microtargeting practices on political and social reality, the “Cambridge Analytica” incident (Isaak, Hanna, 2018) was examined as an empirical example.
- **Phenomenological approach:** Changes in personal identification in the digital environment, including the phenomena of “performative identification” and “echo chambers,” were systematized within the framework of their social and psychological consequences.

This set of methods allowed for evaluating social networks not merely as a simple technological tool, but as an “algorithmic control” system.

3. Results

3.1. Algorithmic curation and data-driven control. The main characteristic of the functioning of social networks is that the information flow is formed not in chronological order, but on the basis of complex algorithmic systems – “algorithmic curation” (Gillespie, 2018). On platforms like Facebook or Instagram, the posts presented to users are sorted based on their previous activities, interests, and interactions with others. Platforms collect massive amounts of data about every user action – content viewed, “likes” given, comments written, and searches conducted – and create an individual model. This turns the digital environment into an instrument of “data-driven control” (Zuboff, 2019) and a “black box” operating on invisible criteria (Pasquale, 2015). As a result, platforms emerge as a social management system that indirectly influences users' social views and political positions by shaping their information environment.

3.2. Microtargeting and political manipulation: The “Cambridge Analytica” practice. Manipulation through social networks is not solely of a theoretical nature. This was clearly demonstrated by the “Cambridge Analytica” scandal that came to light in 2018. The company organized information campaigns adapted to the political

views of millions of users on the Facebook platform by analyzing their psychological characteristics and behavior (Isaak, Hanna, 2018). This event revealed the power of “microtargeting” technology. Unlike traditional mass propaganda, microtargeting makes it possible to exert an individual communicative influence on the user (Bennett, Lyon, 2019). Furthermore, research confirms that manipulative and false information spread on social networks travels faster than in traditional mass media (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

3.3. “Echo Chambers” and information isolation As a result of platform algorithms prioritizing content that matches users' views, the phenomenon of “echo chambers” emerges in the communicative environment. Users primarily operate in an environment that supports their views (Cinelli et al., 2021). This algorithmic information isolation reduces the probability of encountering alternative viewpoints (Sunstein, 2017) and ultimately leads to communicative disconnections between different social groups, thereby increasing political and social polarization (Bakshy et al., 2015).

3.4. The “Attention economy” and emotional impact The revenue of digital platforms is tied to user attention, which is interpreted in social sciences as the “attention economy” (Davenport, Beck, 2001). For example, TikTok’s “For You” algorithm delivers customized content to keep the user on the platform longer (Kaye et al., 2021). Here, interactive functions (likes, comments) create a chain of positive psychological reactions associated with the dopamine system in the human brain (Montag, Hegelich, 2020). To capture attention, algorithms prioritize the distribution of the most emotionally intense, often sharp and controversial content (Brady et al., 2017), leading to the management of users' emotions and moods through “algorithmic persuasion” (Susser et al., 2019).

3.5. Changes in personal identification in the digital environment In contrast to traditional identification, in networks, a "performative identification" emerges, which is formed by the individual presenting themselves before a specific audience (Papacharissi, 2010). At the same time, identification is no longer dependent solely on the person themselves but is also subjected to the algorithm. The platform analyzes data about the individual and forms their digital profile (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Users constantly strive to adapt their content to social recognition and audience expectations (Turkle, 2015), which means that personal identification is manipulated more by the pressure of digital communication and reactions rather than through internal experience.

4. Discussion

The obtained results require a review of the nature and function of social networks in modern society. The analyses above show that social networks perform a dual, mutually contradictory function in modern society. On the one hand, they democratize the process of information exchange and create broad communication opportunities. On the other hand, these platforms are turning into a complex technological environment that influences the formation of social consciousness, shaping new types of digital control mechanisms over users' activities. This situation demands evaluating social networks as a complex social management system that indirectly guides users, rather than simply a means of communication. One of the most fundamental and alarming problems raised in the study is that the functioning mechanisms of platform algorithms are not transparent. Users do not fully

understand the criteria by which the content shown to them is sorted. The operation of these algorithmic systems as a "black box" turns social networks into a crucial element of the modern digital control system. While individuals think they are participating in an independent and free communication process, their information space is entirely managed based on invisible criteria, within the framework of a massive data infrastructure that has been gathered. At this point, it is necessary to emphasize that the economic model of platforms (the attention economy) is directly linked to social and emotional manipulation. The prioritized presentation of emotionally sharp or controversial information as the most effective way to attract attention brings about a communicative influence phenomenon known as "algorithmic persuasion" on platforms. As analyses have shown, emotional moods spread like a chain reaction through the digital environment (in particular, the emotional tone of the content shown to the user is also reflected in their subsequent posts and behaviors). This means that social networks are not merely spaces for receiving information, but a technological apparatus that exerts direct emotional pressure on users' moods and independent thinking processes.

The issue of personal identification in the digital environment is also a direct consequence of this algorithmic control. Unlike the traditional environment, identification on social networks has now become a two-way process that does not depend solely on the individual: as the user presents themselves, the platform's algorithm analyzes public (audience) reactions and evaluates their digital profile. The need for social recognition, stimulated through "likes" and comments that trigger the dopamine system, forces the individual to adapt their social image to the expectations of the platform and the audience. This "performative identification" is a direct manipulation of the individual's identity, because the person shifts to playing a role that draws more social attention, rather than acting from their natural experience.

These continuous algorithmic recommendations produce the phenomenon of "echo chambers," further complicating the problem. The confinement of the user primarily within an information environment and ideological groups that confirm their own opinions leads to the rejection of alternative views in society, communicative disconnections, and ultimately, contradictory political and social polarization. Under the algorithmic analysis system in social networks, the person acts not in an open information space, but on the contrary, inside a strictly bounded shell drawn and manipulated exclusively for their profile. These processes ultimately bring to the agenda the fundamental socio-philosophical question of the extent to which human consciousness and worldview can preserve their cognitive independence in the context of social networks.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, personal identification and communicative experience in the environment of social networks are being formed in organic connection with platform algorithms. Although users express themselves freely in the digital environment, their information environment takes place exactly within a digital space specially organized by the platform infrastructure.

The impact of social networks on human consciousness is not limited merely to communication exchange. Platform algorithms directly interfere with the mechanisms of human learning, information analysis, and decision-making. As a result, an extremely sharp question arises in the modern digital society: if a person's information environment and communication experience are entirely regulated through algorithmic systems, to what extent does their cognitive independence remain preserved under such conditions? This unresolved question necessitates a consistent analysis of the impact of artificial intelligence technologies on human thinking.

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