Glitching the Algorithm: A New Humanism for Watching Online

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Innumerable online communities have arrived in bits of semi-professional and non-professional videos. Often high quality, this content is easily and quickly accessed via most of our connected screens. Regardless, the relative monoculture of television is being transposed to the internet. As pointed out by independent creators on the platform. YouTube today features less "You" and more Fallon, Kimmel, and Colbert from the previous night's broadcasts. It is beginning to appear that the new network will eventually be dominated by the old networks. In this short paper, I will briefly explore the idea that key algorithms are being manipulated, a form of manipulation which can be valuable to scholars, and a way for viewers to resist the diminishment of a human medium.

Traditional media structures are characterized by curated cultural hēgemony and flow, with success measured in ratings, sales, favorable reviews, and awards. In the traditional model of a television evening, some enlightened network executives construct a sequence of episodes that cohere ([R. Williams 1975](#)). The goal is to keep audiences watching and advertising revenue rolling in. New media structures are increasingly characterized by data-driven cultural hegemonies and algorithmic, personalized flows with success measured in views, clicks, likes, subscribes, and other interaction by the multitudes. While the internet once offered the promise of a cultural and technical decentralization (i.e. Web 1.0 based on protocols: e.g. sites. simple forums. biogs, etc.). the ad-funded and solutionist media models now demand centralization (i.e. Web 2.0 based on platforms: e.g. YouTube, Netflix). Instead of merely an evening of television watching, YouTube's goal is continued engagement, delivered in the form of algorithmically-suggested videos which autoplay ad nauseam.

What was once so novel about the internet--the realism and vulnerability of voice online, of creating and communicating with one another--is being marginalized when TV's monoculture starts to dominate YouTube. The platforms and their traditional media partners are beginning to privilege a culture of consumption rather than collective production. In addition, it is becoming increasingly obvious that algorithms are not some "invisible hand" of media circulation. They are being manipulated by various actors. The extent of such manipulation is publicly unknown (as algorithms are concealed by operating platforms as intellectual property) but it is not unusual to find YouTube promoting videos clipped from network shows instead of videos by independent creators with higher amounts of views occurring over shorter amounts of time.

Though I'm focused here on YouTube, the wide-ranging and epistemic power of manipulated algorithms extends across society. If you're like me, you own a not-an-insignificant number of not-so-great products that for at least a moment were at the top of an Amazon search--after filtering "Avg. Customer Review: 4 Stars & Up" and sorting "Price: Low to High." Like me, you've probably come across outdated or incorrect information because Google's search algorithm decided to highlight an erroneous website as the most likely answer. Like me, maybe you've accepted without reservation some of the "most likely" answers.

The manipulation of algorithms comes in three forms: (1) hacking--external and semi-covert manipulation towards a desired end, (2) tweaking--internal and covert corrections made by the platform to favor its goals, and (3) glitching--external, overt, and playful breaking, which inadvertently makes us aware of algorithmic limits. Here I'm referring primarily to induced rather than random glitching.

Of the three, glitching appears the least useful for media industry employees but the most useful for media and technology scholars. Glitching won't help us in increasing consumption metrics or reworking some valuable system, but it could allow us to better understand what is happing on the platforms. To the extent that we can, media and technology scholars must break open platforms and their algorithms as though they were radios and televisions, and/or closely consider what it means to watch in the attention economy.

For viewers, to glitch the algorithm is also to tinker with and understand technology, to reveal the obfuscated logics of Web 2.0 which are beginning to resemble and serve traditional media interests rather than their own. Glitching is a new humanism, in the sense that it emphasizes human agency over algorithmic flow in an age of technological ubiquity. At the simplest level, viewers might sort by "New" on the platforms, resist suggested content, seek out and engage decentralized internet communities, and resist celebrity (particularly as merely transferred from traditional medial. Fallon, Kimmel, and Colbert are online, on the platform created as an alternative to the dominance of their networks. That box has been opened, but it will take a collective effort by independent creators, viewers, and scholars to maintain a weird and human segment of a platform that is becoming a profit-driven machine.