

# Algorithmic ~~Culture~~ Content

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Over the last decade, the creation and distribution of *cultural production* have become increasingly automated and are currently in the process of losing their human touch. This development can be illustrated by example of *the image*.

1: Ondřej, T. (2021). Do Algorithms Dream of Portraits of Their Own Mothers?. *Fotograf #41*

2: Cubitt, S., Lury, C., McQuire, S., Papastergiadis, N., Palmer, D., Pfefferkorn, J., & Sunde, E. K. (2021). Ambient Images. *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 30(61-62), 68-77. <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v30i61-62.127861>

3: Lu, C. *The Algorithmic Internet: Culture, Capture, Corruption*. <https://www.paradigmtrilogy.com/assets/documents/issue-02/christina-lu--the-algorithmic-internet.pdf>

4: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*.

Most digital images that we encounter daily are seen through the *algorithmic lens*. From the algorithmic photos we take with our smartphones to the images we see on digital platforms. In essence, digital images are the product of computational processes and neural networks.<sup>1</sup> With the advent of image synthesis through machine learning, the image is now ultimately inseparable from the (neural) network (from which it was generated). However, even before that technological development, images were created for and consumed through (social) networks. Accelerated by the pandemic, our lives are now constantly mediated through digital images that are shared online and filtered by algorithms.<sup>2</sup>

## The Algorithmic Internet

The impact of artificial intelligence on our (visual) culture is deeply linked to the relationship between machine learning models and the Internet, as software engineer Christina Lu points out in her essay *The Algorithmic Internet: Culture, capture, corruption*.<sup>3</sup>

Lu describes the success of AI systems being attributed to the notions of *scale and ease*, with *scale* referring to the significant amount of information that is needed to train massive machine learning models. With so much information available on the web, it could be argued that the so-called *foundation models* are essentially *Internet-based*.<sup>4</sup>

5: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*, 2.

6: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*, 2.

7: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*.

Fed by the Internet, these algorithms are implanted back into the web, changing the way we act online to the point that “machine learning models [...] organize every stream of information we come into contact with online: the

Algorithmic Internet.”<sup>5</sup>

The Internet thereby functions as a “networked mass communication apparatus,”<sup>6</sup> not exclusively but most visibly through social media, where information from any domain is immediately available and presented in the feed, filtered by recommendation systems.<sup>7</sup>

Recommendation algorithms ease our engagement with content and thus change our behaviour by manipulating our desires to keep us on the platform, as Lu describes in her essay:

*“The Algorithmic Internet seizes our base impulses and demands their immediate satisfaction, hooking us into a morphine drip of anticipated wants, infuriating takes, slick surfaces. It pries our jaw open to a deluge of information, funneling all inputs*

*into a single collapsed channel and diluting any meaningful signal.*

*It forces hyper-connection on a scale that does not lend itself to useful mental modeling of our world. Our senses are blown, our efforts to make sense of things become actively detrimental to our being, and we lash back or give in.”<sup>8</sup>*

She argues that the daily amount of information we encounter on the Internet, especially on social media, confuses us to the point where we are unable to comprehend world events, since any kind of content is presented to us repeatedly without context or linearity.

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Consequently, our addictive behaviour, enabled by algorithms, makes us endlessly scroll through this vast space of flattened and streamlined information without narrative.<sup>9</sup>

8: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*, 2-3.

Chunk 4

9: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*.

Chunk 5

10: Eichhorn, K. (2022). 'Content (The MIT Press Essential Knowledge series). The MIT Press

11: Eichhorn, *Content*, 97.

12: Shorin, T. (2018). Report: The Diminishing Marginal Value of Aesthetics. *Subpixel* (blog). <https://subpixel.space/entries/diminishing-marginal-aesthetic-value/>

13: Shorin, *Report: The Diminishing Marginal Value of Aesthetics*.

14: Shorin, *Report: The Diminishing Marginal Value of Aesthetics*.

15: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*, 5.

16: Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*.

17: Self, J. (2018). THE BIG FLAT NOW: Power, Flatness, and Nowness in the Third Millennium. *032c*. <https://032c.com/magazine/the-big-flat-now-power-flatness-and-nowness-in-the-third-millennium>

18: PORTO ROCHA and Float. Design Thread 2 - Excess of Everything. *Designthreads*. <https://www.designthreads.report/thread2>

19: Austin, D. (2022) #193: Sludgefeast. *Kneeling Bus* (Substack newsletter). <https://kneelingbus.substack.com/p/193-sludgefeast>; Lu, *The Algorithmic Internet*.

## Artists & Designers as Content Creators

This development has had a major influence on both the value of aesthetic productions (such as images) and their cultural producers:

Various types of cultural workers are now often referred to simply as *content creators*, regardless of their chosen medium or their role within creative productions.<sup>10</sup> This strongly reflects the value perception of cultural products, as media historian and theorist Kate Eichhorn summarizes:

*“Whereas practices such as writing, editing, filmmaking, and photography were once considered highly skilled (even if they did always have amateur participants), in the age of content, the ability to produce a lot of content increasingly seems to matter more than the ability to produce high-quality cultural products.”<sup>11</sup>*

The Internet allows individuals to now create, distribute, and receive content through social media, forming a direct relationship between the producer and the audience. As a result, media companies and individual producers now share the same broadcast dynamic. In addition to the *aesthetic relativism* created by the feed, media content, and therefore all aesthetics, are always “available on demand.”<sup>12</sup> This development therefore makes *aesthetic novelty* far more difficult to achieve.<sup>13</sup>

Combined with the absence of additional distribution costs and the resulting increased speed of content circulation, as well as the decreasing cost of creative production due to the availability of inexpensive and efficient tools, the value of producing images has decreased significantly, as researcher Toby Shorin has observed.<sup>14</sup>

According to Lu, content therefore becomes suitable for mindless consumption, which leads to a flattening of our (digital) culture. Aesthetic novelty and creativity are exchanged for repetition, recognition, and “frictionless ease funneling us into creative torpor.”<sup>15</sup> Our attention spans, and with them our capacity to interact, empathize, and create in a meaningful manner, is increasingly repressed by the algorithmic feeds that dominate the Internet.<sup>16</sup>

The development of our media sphere has increased the speed of communication to a contradictory degree, where “[creative] content must be understood instantly, [...] must be familiar and uncomplicated, but also astonishing and new.”<sup>17</sup>

Cultural producers are in crisis and increasingly unable to keep up with the demands of the industry to produce new but familiar work at lightning speed, while at the same time having to be on top of *the new* and constantly updating their skills.<sup>18</sup>

## Content as Commodity

With the popularization of generative, multimodal AI systems, this condition is accelerating, and it appears as though cultural production could soon be fully taken over by algorithms. Nowadays, algorithms are not only filtering content through *recommender systems*, but also populating media channels by generating content appearing on our social media feeds.<sup>19</sup>

According to Austin’s observations, with the ability of producing content at a seemingly infinite scale, cultural production can be seen as the prime example for showcasing AI’s recent progress.

Chunk 6 20: Austin, #193.

21: Austin, #193.

22: Austin, #193.

23: Chayka, K. [@chaykak]. (2023, February 1). “I’ll Say Again What I Will Doubtless Be Saying a Million Times in the Coming Years: Algorithmic Feeds Have Pushed Content Creators to Conform to the Acceptable Aesthetic and Cultural Average; A.I. Generation Will Just Automatically Produce That Average from the Start “[Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/chaykak/status/1620891495502057472>

24: Chayka, *I’ll Say Again*.

The amount of content produced daily has multiplied over the last years with an inevitable and drastic increase still to come.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the involvement of generative algorithms is seemingly changing the future purpose of content: “Instead of an output — something to inform or entertain humans — content will increasingly be an input for our massive global culture machine, with AI distilling the existing archive into yet more content in an accelerating cycle.”<sup>21</sup> This results in generative AI systems being trained on their own output, leading to “[c]ontent [that] has become sentient and now consumes itself.”<sup>22</sup>

In a recent Twitter thread, cultural writer Kyle Chayka concludes that “[algorithmic] feeds have pushed content creators to conform to the acceptable aestheti-

c and cultural average; [and] A.I. generation will just automatically produce that average from the start.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, content will be further commodified, due to a new agent entering the realm of content production, namely the average user “who is probably less interesting or innovative even than an algorithmically popular creator.”<sup>24</sup>

It appears as though in our modern media landscape we are heading towards a much larger, even flatter and more meaningless synthetic cultural landscape.

Generative AI systems are here to stay, and it is therefore important that artists and designers familiarize themselves with generative models, begin to cultivate more meaningful ways to interact with these systems, and find healthier ways to distribute the collaborative output that results from engaging with them.

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Chunk 8

