

Streaming Against the Spiral: Entertainment as Civic Infrastructure in the Age of Algorithmic Recursion

By John Eisenhower

The digital landscape—engineered by algorithms that privilege engagement over inclusivity—has become a terrain of emotional manipulation and ideological fragmentation. Platforms like X and Facebook do not merely reflect our divisions; they deepen them. Their architecture rewards outrage, elevates alpha voices, and suppresses nuance. In this ecosystem, tribal cohesion thrives while moral pluralism withers.

There is a phenomenon where social media algorithms prioritize engagement metrics over inclusivity: [leading to the creation of echo chambers](#) that reinforce users' emotional and ideological identities. These echo chambers pool individuals with same fundamental bias (such as a support of Christian Nationalism) that is defined by base emotions (anger, hate and prejudice):

- (1) These [algorithms can trigger strong emotions, resulting in filter bubbles](#) that promote misinformation and limit meaningful dialogue.

Social media algorithms are designed to maximize engagement by promoting emotionally charged content—especially anger, outrage, or fear. According to the BBC, this leads to filter bubbles and echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints, reinforcing ideological biases and emotional identities. These environments discourage critical thinking and limit exposure to diverse perspectives. As users interact more with provocative content, the algorithm further amplifies it, creating a feedback loop that can normalize misinformation and prejudice. This dynamic is particularly dangerous when it pools individuals around emotionally driven ideologies like Christian Nationalism, fostering division and undermining inclusive, democratic discourse

- (2) The use of AI bots demonstrated that echo chambers – which favored extreme views – inevitably formed (creating ideological silos). It became obvious that it was inevitable for social media algorithms to enhance misinformation and extreme views.

A recent experiment by University of Amsterdam researchers simulated a social network populated entirely by AI bots to test interventions against echo chamber formation. Despite efforts like chronological feeds and boosting diverse viewpoints, polarization persisted or worsened. Toxic content not only dominated visibility but also shaped network structures, reinforcing ideological silos. AI-driven recommendation systems, designed to maximize attention, often amplify misinformation and extreme views. As generative AI becomes more powerful, these dynamics intensify, making platforms more susceptible to ideological clustering—especially around emotionally charged identities

like Christian Nationalism—while undermining the promise of inclusive, deliberative digital public spheres.

- (3) Algorithmically curated content [fosters emotional identification](#), strengthening cognitive alignment within isolated informational ecosystems. This worsens existing mental health problems.

Stanford psychiatrists Nina Vasani and Sara Johansen highlight how algorithmic design in social media exploits dopamine-driven reward systems—likes, notifications, and intermittent feedback—to sustain user engagement. This fosters compulsive scrolling and emotional dependency, which intensifies social comparison, erodes self-esteem, and contributes to anxiety, depression, and distorted body image. Algorithmically curated echo chambers reinforce ideological identities and base emotions, such as anger and prejudice, while isolating users from diverse perspectives. AI-driven filters may reduce overt harm, but the deeper psychological toll remains. Ethical design must shift from minimizing harm to promoting wellbeing, especially as these platforms shape young minds and public discourse.

This results in a fragmented digital landscape [where users are more likely to engage](#) with content that aligns with their existing beliefs and biases.

But the problem is deeper than fragmentation. It is recursive.

As I explored in [Social Media Is a Möbius Strip](#), the structure of social media is not linear—it loops. Algorithms prioritize emotionally charged content, creating echo chambers where outrage and affirmation cycle endlessly. Users are not discovering—they are reinforcing. Identity becomes algorithmically hardened, not through dialogue, but through dopamine.

[When you feel anger](#), your body releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol: these changes result in an increase in heart rate and blood pressure (resulting in heightened energy levels). This prepares your body for a potential confrontation or escape. Additionally, there is increased activity in the amygdala, a part of the brain involved in processing emotions (especially fear and aggression). The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making and impulse control, may also show decreased activity: making it harder to think clearly and control your reactions.

A study conducted by researchers at University College London explored the brain's response to viewing images of individuals participants claimed to hate. The study – led by Professor Semir Zeki and John Romaya – identified what they called a '[hate circuit](#)' in the brain. When participants viewed pictures of people they disliked, distinct areas of the brain were activated, (including the putamen and insula). These regions are associated with aggression and the preparation for action, suggesting that hatred involves both emotional and motor components.

Interestingly, the study also found some overlap between the brain regions activated by hatred and those associated with romantic love, such as the putamen. This overlap highlights the complex and intertwined nature of human emotions: where seemingly opposite feelings can share neural pathways.

The emotions are hardwired in. The authoritarian just has to work them...push the buttons.

The result is a digital Möbius strip: a surface with only one side, where every turn leads back to the same emotional terrain.

This recursive architecture was weaponized by the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency (IRA), as detailed in the [Senate Intelligence Committee's Volume 2](#) report on Russian interference in the 2016 election. The IRA exploited algorithmic features to amplify engagement among users with Christian nationalist leanings, curating emotionally resonant content that invoked religious identity, patriotism, and anti-Clinton sentiment. The goal was not persuasion—it was polarization. The result: ideological silos, tribal loyalty, and offline mobilization.

Social media algorithms are engineered to maximize engagement, and they do so by prioritizing content that evokes strong, immediate emotional responses—particularly base emotions like anger, hate, and prejudice. These emotions are easily quantifiable through likes, shares, and comments, making them ideal for algorithmic amplification.

In contrast, compassion and empathy, which require context, nuance, and reflection, are difficult to measure and thus rarely promoted.

As a result, users with simplistic, emotionally reactive worldviews are more likely to be drawn into algorithmically curated echo chambers that reinforce their biases. These chambers reward tribalism and moral absolutism, creating feedback loops that deepen ideological entrenchment. Meanwhile, individuals with more complex, integrative worldviews—those who seek nuance, contradiction, and empathy—are less likely to engage with emotionally charged content and therefore less visible within these systems.

The algorithm's design penalizes sophistication and rewards emotional volatility, leading to a digital landscape where reductive narratives thrive and thoughtful discourse is marginalized. This dynamic not only distorts public understanding but also fragments communities, as emotionally reactive users are pooled together, reinforcing each other's prejudices while remaining insulated from alternative perspectives. The result is a social media ecosystem that favors spectacle over substance, and emotional manipulation over meaningful dialogue.

Accepting the premise that MAGA and Trump play on base emotions—anger, hate, and prejudice—social media becomes an ideal tool for pushing racist, homophobic, and generally hateful individuals into algorithmically sealed silos. These silos are not just digital—they are psychological, spiritual, and political. They coordinate offline action, reinforce tribal loyalty, and elevate dominance over deliberation.

The algorithm does not reward nuance, empathy, or complexity. It rewards spectacle. And so, the progressive message—rooted in civic participation, environmental stewardship, and pluralistic values—struggles to gain traction.

Every person is ultimately motivated by base emotions (based upon physiology) that exist to further survival. Many people cannot transcend these states. Motivated by hate, fear and anger only, they are the drivers behind all the nasty stuff: slavery, genocide and so on. A progressive – or woke person - rises above them and cultivate states like compassion and empathy.

Such people create societies that embrace [the social contract](#). This means that they endeavor to realize a society where the benefit flows to each person (as much as possible...it is a challenge). And this means that some people must give up a little.

A person that forms a worldview based on compassion and empathy is a more nuanced thinker – and, frankly, a smarter one – than someone who bases his worldview on hate, anger and prejudice.

Social media elevates stupid and hateful people: Trump supporters.

This is where entertainment must intervene.

In *Using Sitcoms and Sci-Fi to Get People to Vote*, I argued that traditional campaign-based outreach is insufficient. What we need is a year-round cultural strategy—one that embeds progressive ideals into the very fabric of entertainment. Sitcoms, sci-fi, drama, and satire can become vessels for civic imagination. They can model participation, celebrate environmental concern, and normalize pluralism.

To that end, I propose the creation of a **progressive streaming platform**—a cultural infrastructure analogous to [Pure Flix](#).

Pure Flix is a Christian streaming service dedicated to providing faith-based, family-friendly entertainment that aligns with biblical values. Its primary goal is to offer an alternative to mainstream media by curating content that promotes moral integrity, spiritual growth, and positive messaging. The platform features a wide range of movies, documentaries, series, and educational programs that emphasize themes such as redemption, forgiveness, courage, and hope—often rooted in Christian teachings.

The streamer aims to serve families, churches, and individuals seeking wholesome entertainment free from explicit content, profanity, or secular ideologies. It positions itself as a safe digital space where viewers can engage with stories that reinforce Christian beliefs and foster community through shared values. The service also supports Christian filmmakers by providing a platform for their work, helping to expand the reach of faith-based storytelling.

Beyond entertainment, Pure Flix aspires to be a tool for discipleship and evangelism, encouraging viewers to reflect on their faith and apply biblical principles in daily life. Its objectives include nurturing spiritual connection, strengthening family bonds, and countering cultural narratives that conflict with Christian doctrine. In essence, Pure Flix seeks to merge media consumption with ministry, using storytelling as a vehicle for inspiration and moral clarity.

I propose a streaming service that is also about furthering an agenda: championing civic engagement, environmental ethics, and inclusive values. This platform would feature original programming that is unapologetically progressive, emotionally resonant, and narratively bold.

Unlike social media posts that vanish into the scroll, this programming would be **up indefinitely**—a persistent cultural artifact. Its stars would appear on talk shows like *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, discussing how progressive ideals are woven into their characters and storylines. These interviews would go viral, not because they trigger outrage, but because they offer clarity, humor, and hope. The recursive loop is disrupted—not by counter-outrage, but by counter-narrative.

Consider *Out in the Open*, the hypothetical comedy I discussed in a couple past essays: [*Trump Is a Dictator*](#) and [*Using Sitcoms and Sci-Fi to Get People to Vote Woke*](#)

It centers on a queer couple navigating life in a small town where MAGA ideology is both background noise and existential threat. The show is funny, sharp, and emotionally grounded. It doesn't just entertain—it educates, affirms, and mobilizes. Its cast becomes cultural ambassadors, appearing on podcasts, panels, and late-night shows to discuss civic participation, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental justice.

A smart, emotionally layered sitcom spin-off of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, it stars Stephanie Beatriz as Rosa Diaz, who's left behind her life as a detective to start fresh in Fairhaven, Ohio. Disillusioned by institutional justice, Rosa launches an LGBTQ advocacy center in a town where civic dysfunction and cultural resistance collide. Her mission: build community, fight for equity, and take on the city council—one passive-aggressive ordinance at a time.

Her closest ally is **Jules**, a nonbinary organizer who moonlights as a drag performer and bartender at Fairhaven's only gay club. Jules brings heart, flair, and a spreadsheet

for every occasion. But when the city council—led by the transparently insincere **Councilman Robert**—moves to ban drag performances, Jules becomes both symbol and target. Robert, a self-important blowhard in the mold of *Parks and Rec*'s Councilman Jamm, loudly touts “traditional values” while quietly cheating on his wife and misusing city funds. Rosa and Robert clash constantly, with Rosa’s fiery passion often overwhelming her ability to strategize.

Enter **Patti**, Rosa’s girlfriend, played by Chelsea Peretti in a role that echoes—but doesn’t replicate—her *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* character Gina Linetti. Patti shares Gina’s quick wit and outside-the-box thinking, but she’s sweet-natured, empathetic, and grounded. She’s Rosa’s emotional counterweight: able to read a room, analyze a situation, and offer calm, incisive advice. Rosa confides in Jules that she was never fond of Gina’s narcissism but always admired her intelligence—and found her physically attractive, though it was irrelevant. Patti, perceptive and curious, occasionally senses that Rosa sees echoes of someone else in her and gently probes for details. Rosa, aware of the emotional complexity, always demurs, not wanting to stir conflict.

Meanwhile, **Mayor Grace**—a politically liberal leader with genuine empathy for Rosa’s cause—is caught between her conscience and her ambition. With a Senate or gubernatorial run on the horizon, Grace supports Rosa’s efforts but constantly hedges, playing both sides to avoid alienating swing voters. Her dynamic with Rosa is layered: part ally, part obstacle, part cautionary tale.

With a tone that blends the irreverence of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the civic absurdity of *Parks and Recreation*, and the emotional depth of *Schitt’s Creek*, *Out in the Open* explores identity, power, and the messy art of advocacy in a town where everyone’s agenda is just a little bit fabulous—and no one’s past is ever entirely behind them.

[I have already written the pilot episode \(partial\).](#)

[Three or four years ago, I wrote another pilot called “Rati”.](#)

Other hypothetical programs include:

- **The Resistance Revue:** A sketch comedy show that satirizes authoritarianism, media spectacle, and political absurdity with biting wit and progressive clarity.
- **Tomorrowland Diaries:** A sci-fi drama where climate refugees build a new society based on cooperation, sustainability, and radical empathy.
- **The Civic Room:** A reality-style docuseries that follows young activists as they organize, debate, and build coalitions across ideological divides.

These shows do not exist to preach. They exist to perform—to model excellence, resilience, and pluralism. They bypass the algorithmic spiral by creating emotional resonance on their own terms. They reach younger voters—those who already lean progressive but lack consistent cultural reinforcement. They build identity not through outrage, but through imagination.

The streamer's objective is two-fold:

(1) The primary goal is to get people to vote for competent – and ethical – representatives.

(2) The secondary goal is the furtherance of woke ideals. Agora is premised on the notion that entertainment functions as a de facto civic curriculum. Its ubiquity and emotional power make it the primary vehicle through which collective meaning is negotiated: often more effectively than policy debates or academic discourse. To get a person to vote from a perspective of concern and respect requires an [infostructure](#). While an *infrastructure* refers to the physical thing that provides a service – like a highway being a physical thing that provides the service of travel – an *infostructure* lays out the information so that the *infrastructure* can be used correctly (like a driver's manual). Agora entertainment would champion the values that define an Honorable society.

Entertainment is not a distraction—it is a delivery system. It bypasses the algorithmic gatekeepers. It does not loop—it expands.

In *Trump Is a Dictator*, I explored the authoritarian impulse that thrives in algorithmic silos. The progressive streamer would – in contrast – affirm democratic values, that celebrate complexity, and that invite participation. Entertainment, in this sense, becomes a form of resistance—a way to reclaim the public square from the spectacle of dominance.

We must build a cultural infrastructure that supports civic engagement year-round. Not through slogans, but through stories. Not through campaigns, but through characters. Not through fear, but through hope.

Because in an age of algorithmic recursion, the most radical act may be to tell a story that doesn't loop—but liberates.