

Mia Cantacesso: SEEN / UNSEEN

## 1. Concept and Rationale:

My project explores the curated reality of social media and the ways in which algorithms reinforce habitual behaviors that discourage users from critically engaging with information. It visualizes the presence of algorithms and the hidden influences they hold through a user's interactions with their digital feed. The central question I hope to answer is, "How do attention-driven algorithms shape online behaviors, and how can social media users develop conscious, critical engagement habits?"

Visually, my project is structured as a digital stop-motion animation, featuring a habitual media user on social media. Throughout the animation, two frames are presented—what is *seen* and *unseen*. The content that is “seen” is generated through an algorithm on the user's phone. The visuals and text communicate the idea that engagement and attention fuel algorithms. The simulated content in the phone feed reflects this in the form of mindless entertainment, political clickbait, and advertisements. The addictive behavior of the user reveals how social media does not prioritize truth or diverse perspectives. The “unseen” content is what is left out of the user's feed.

The following outline provides a transcript of the visuals and text used in the animation:

- Text: “In a world shaped by infinite content and limited attention, what we see and what we don't see is no accident.”
- Text: “Social media content is designed to be contagious, not factually correct.”
- Visual: A user stands in a vast space, head down, browsing social media on their phone.
  - Text: “Platforms are fueled by user engagement.”

- Visual: A close-up of the user's phone shows a simulated social media feed. Mindless entertainment, political clickbait, and advertisements flood the feed.
- Visual: A close-up of the user's face shows their eyes flick up and down, scrolling online, fully engaged with the content before them.
  - Text: "The measure of success is attention, not truth."
- Visual: A close-up of the user's phone continues. From above, thick black wires feed into the device, accompanied by the words "curating your algorithm." The user continues to scroll.
- Visual: A close-up of the user's face. Their eyes continue to flick up and down.
  - Text: "Algorithms reinforce habitual behaviors. Users are discouraged from critically sharing information."
- Visual: The user continues to scroll.
  - Text: "When our feed feels personalized, we stop questioning what's missing."
- Visual: The user continues to scroll as their feed is now projected in front of them.
  - Text: "Without active intervention, misinformation and bias will spread."
  - Text: "Look beyond the algorithm. Seek diverse perspectives."
- Visual: Information about developing healthy social media habits such as media literacy skills and reading laterally begin to emerge outside of the phone feed.
- Visual: The same information begins to circle around the user's head, enlightening them about the structures of social media and the value of their own attention.
- Text: "Value your attention. Question what you see. Share consciously."



## 2. Choice of Medium:

My project takes the form of a stop motion animation with accompanied text. The animation was developed through the app *Procreate*, and the text was layered with *Adobe Premiere Pro*. The AI tool, *ChatGPT-4o*, was used to generate a simulated algorithm feed in the animation. The decision to curate the feed using AI was especially important, as it provided a more authentic representation of an algorithm-generated feed. The results were used to mimic the typical structure of social media platforms on a smartphone.

The concept of algorithmic filtering is abstract and invisible, making it challenging to communicate visually. Research on algorithms and the habits that drive the spread of misinformation typically exists in academic contexts, far removed from the platforms where these issues are occurring. I chose a video format because it is suitable for platforms such as Facebook or TikTok, where content is consumed in a short-form structure. In addition to being easily digestible, the information in my piece is supported by visuals, a character, and a story. I was able to present a research-driven message as a narrative that viewers can connect with. Animation was a format that gave me the most creative control toward developing the project and achieving these goals.

### 3. Engagement with Academic Materials:

Several academic texts shaped the key ideas in my project. The messages communicated through my animation were inspired by the sources I explored in my research, providing further context to the visuals.

**Source 1:** Gizem Ceylan et. al., “Sharing of misinformation is habitual, not just lazy or biased” (pp.1-8), Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 120.4 (2023).

The authors of this text explore the idea that social media’s structure fuels the formation of harmful sharing habits in its users. These behaviors cause users to share information without thinking critically about the potential consequences of spreading biased, manipulated, or false content. The idea that algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy was crucial to address in my project.

**Source 2:** Tim Wu, “Ch.22 The Rise of Clickbait” (276-288) in *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (Vintage Books, 2016).

This text was useful toward communicating the idea of attention as a form of currency on social media. In this chapter, Wu explores the concept of contagious media and how success is measured with attention, not truth. He notes that viral content is not accidental and aims to exploit users’ attention through clickbait headlines and sensationalism. This source shaped the content that I chose to present in the curated social media feed of the animation. The feed expanded beyond political headlines toward any form of content that prioritized engagement over accuracy such as advertisements and entertainment.

**Source 3:** Alicia Urgellés-Molina and Mónica Herrero, “Personalization of Content in Video-on-Demand Services: Insights from Satisfaction over Social Media Algorithms” (*Comhumanitas* Vol. 15, no. 2), December 2024.

This study specifically addresses how a user’s awareness of algorithms affects their social media behaviors. Unlike the previous sources mentioned, this text addresses the key idea of personalization: “As users perceive algorithms as more responsive to their needs and identities, their satisfaction with the platform increases” (Urgellés-Molina and Herrero 181). If users understand how the algorithm captures their attention, they will be more aware of their consumption habits. Additionally, the authors make the concept of algorithmic personalization more concrete, describing the dangers presented in the animation such as the spread of mis/disinformation and manipulation. These implications increase the significance of the project and present clear risks that I communicated alongside my animations.

**Source 4:** Mike Caulfield, “Ch. 16 What Reading Laterally Means,” in *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers* (Pressbooks, self-published, 2017).

The content of this article and the idea of reading laterally is one of the solutions I present in my project. The concept encourages users to research the information that they come across on social media. Users must search for diverse perspectives beyond the initial source in order to develop the most accurate understanding of a piece of information.

## **5. Knowledge Enhancement:**

In addition to forming harmful habits, Ceylan's "Sharing of misinformation is habitual, not just lazy or biased" presents the idea that it is possible for users to form habits to share true information. However, they suggest that the only reasonable solution toward preventing the spread of misinformation is for social media platforms to de-prioritize unverified content or add additional steps to make the process of sharing posts less automatic.

Based on the solutions provided in Mike Caulfield's reading and the conclusions developed in Urgellés-Molina and Herrero's study, there are actions that individuals can take to be more conscious media consumers. Caulfield presents the idea of lateral reading and exploring topics through multiple sources across platforms to develop a more accurate interpretation of the content. Urgellés-Molina and Herrero encourage users to develop an awareness of the algorithm itself: "Enhancing algorithmic literacy through education could empower users to make more informed decisions about their media consumption" (Urgellés-Molina and Herrero 185).

These sources support the idea that users must combat the development of harmful sharing habits and think critically about the implications of their media behaviors. Ceylan's study discourages the potential for user resistance against the harmful structure of social media, but it is more reasonable to educate users than it is to rely on platforms to prioritize accuracy over engagement.

My project contributes to this idea by raising viewers' awareness of algorithmic filtering and addressing the importance of media literacy. I communicated the message that algorithms fuel the production of harmful habits through a fresh perspective that is both informative and engaging. By being aware of the algorithm and placing more value in one's attention, users will be more conscious of how they engage with social media and what they choose to share. My

animation provides an easily digestible channel for this information, presenting the following conclusions: Value your attention, question what you see, and share consciously.

## Works Cited

- Caulfield, Mike, "Ch. 16 What Reading Laterally Means." *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers*, Pressbooks, 2017. <https://pressbooks.pub/webliteracy/web-strategies>.
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