

Who's in Charge Here? Creativity and control on the social web

This presentation explores ways in which social media algorithms, and in particular the digital systems which comprise Instagram's *For You* feed, are influencing visual language. It positions digital spaces as non-neutral mechanisms of control exerting a recursive influence on photography and wider visual culture. Through platform analysis and a practice-based process of experimentation, it seeks to understand the impacts of algorithmic systems of (re)mediation on contemporary photographic practices. Based on these findings, it assesses potential strategies of response, from collusion to withdrawal, that return the power of visibility back to image makers.

Mobile phones and the social internet have transformed photography into a medium of exchange. As Nathan Jurgenson observes, "an emerging perspective within media and photography studies posits the social photo as more communication than professional art"¹. This shift from broadcast to interface² was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the rate of production and ease of consumption, both of which created the need for new mechanisms for mediation and moderation. This need has largely been addressed by algorithms, which scan images and decipher their content using comparisons against existing datasets in order to register and regulate them³. Their purposes range from generating engagement based on user preferences, to identifying brands and messages in order to provide business intelligence, to detecting prohibited images such as violence or pornography to ensure that platforms comply with national laws or internal rules. Within these networks, images serve as placeholders, tokens of information traded between parties whose interest is not what they show, but what they reveal.

Significant attention has been dedicated to understanding the technical and social functions of algorithms; this presentation contributes an aesthetic and philosophical perspective. This analysis helps artists to see how their work is being affected by the recursive feedback issued by these machines and to make it easier to understand how to reply to them. Algorithmic content distribution systems exert significant editorial influence across contemporary visual culture due to their role in determining the visibility of digital media. It is challenging to decipher their actions because, as commercial properties, their functions are deliberately obscured to protect the interests of their owners⁴. But by studying the recursive impact of algorithms on the phenomenology of photographic images⁵, it is possible to observe certain key aspects of how creative practices navigate this new terrain, and its effect on the evolution of photography.

Through a survey of artist practices which interact with the 'For You' page, the research identifies a number of archetypal modes of response to algorithmic control in which the photograph's visual layer, its "surface" rather than its "depth"⁶, consciously acknowledges the presence of algorithmic processes as participants in the photographic encounter. These responses range from incorporation of algorithm-friendly information into images (the most common being so-called "For the algorithm" images⁷), to choosing to withdraw entirely from public internet spaces except when an outcome is fully prepared for distribution, as is the case in Dark Forest Theory (see below). Based on this analysis, visual experiments aim to confirm the observed phenomena and replicate their production in order to better understand the role of algorithms as participants in the process of image creation. In doing so, this research positions Instagram's 'For You' page as a curatorial force within photography and proposes that the recursive turn in visual media is the result of ad-hoc attempts to accommodate its influence.

The research concludes by asking how a future photographic practice might be able to proactively prefigure the influence of algorithms to benefit from the positive potential of these systems while retaining true creative independence and evading their control. In this, it explores an emerging strand of digital culture theory known as Dark Forest Theory⁸, which adopts an adversarial stance to the open Internet, choosing instead to inhabit stacks of private and semi-private spaces in which audiences share common interests with makers, and algorithmic control is minimal or non-existent. This offers a useful hypothetical in which the distinctions between open and closed networks, and public and private spaces, can be compared and contrasted. Overall the research aims to provide a series of potential guiding principles for photographers seeking to engage intentionally with the social web.

Keywords: Algorithms, circulation, future photographic practices, visibility, recursivity

- ¹ Jurgenson, N. (2019). *The social photo: On Photography and Social Media*. Verso Books.
- ² Cruz, E. G., & Lehmuskallio, A. (2016). *Digital photography and everyday life: Empirical Studies on Material Visual Practices*. Routledge.
- ³ Paglen, T and Crawford, K 2019 *Excavating AI The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets*. <https://excavating.ai>
- ⁴ Crawford, K. (2016). Can an Algorithm be Agonistic? Ten Scenes from Life in Calculated Publics. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 41(1), 77–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43671283>
- ⁵ Andrew Fisher, 'Beyond Barthes: Rethinking the phenomenology of photography', *Radical Philosophy* 148, Mar/Apr 2008.
- ⁶ Clarke, G. (1997). *The photograph*.
- ⁷ See an example here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DRp5IFhEgTE/>
- ⁸ Strickler, Y. (2019, May 16). *The Dark Forest theory of the internet*. Yancey Strickler. <https://ideaspace.ystrickler.com/p/the-dark-forest-theory-of-the-internet>