Strategies of visibility: The role of platforms

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Abstract:
This article focuses on platforms' strategies for making their contents visible, in particular via algorithm-based recommendation systems. Platforms try to forge a belief in the effectiveness of these systems in order to strengthen their position over users and commercial players as well as public and regulatory authorities. Having both material and mental dimensions, these recommendation systems are to match the abundant supply of contents offered on a platform with the demand for them. This apparent function contrasts with their part in establishing and legitimating power relations in behalf of the platforms. To shed light on this situation, we might have to consider the economics of cultural productions to be not just an attention economics but also an economics of uncertainty.

The upsurge of online platforms around 2010 has made it easy to distribute a mass of contents created and uploaded by: self-employed persons, the "amateurs" at the origin of user-generated contents (UGC), the brands that are seeking to promote their offers and, too, players in the culture and entertainment industries or newcomers like Netflix. Alongside contents with long or medium formats have arisen contents with short formats.[1]

Given the abundant contents offered on a single platform, the question of the visibility of these contents has been raised but in terms different from the strategies for gaining visibility that the media used to pursue for broadcasts, the publication of books or release of records. On a platform, gaining visibility mainly takes place through recommendation systems, *i.e.*, the algorithmic procedures for organizing the collecting and processing of masses of data. These systems propose a customized choice of contents that, in principle, will meet users' expectations and suit their tastes (expressed or even unexpressed).

The platforms with offers in the field of culture are a disparate lot. For want of a set of categories covering all of them, I shall draw attention to a key difference. Whereas some platforms negotiate early the permission to distribute or even produce contents, others bring users into contact with content-providers without intervening in the offers made. They simply require users and those who design offers of products or services to abide by the contract for joining the platform. This contract regulates relations between various parties on the platform: users, suppliers and consumers. Following a series of long studies, economists (HAGIU & WRIGHT 2015, ROCHET & TIROLE 2003) have made the distinction between "*stores*" and "*multisided platforms*". As for the theory of the "*cultural industries*", it has drawn attention to two models: the club and brokerage (MOEGLIN 2007). This distinction is important since platforms' recommendation systems differ depending on how platform operators intervene in the offer of contents on their websites.

[1] This article, including quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in December 2020.

It is important to place the algorithms of recommendation systems in their socioeconomic context since they seek to maximize customer satisfaction but while pursuing other objectives. This article draws attention to the issues related to the strategies of visibility adopted by the international platforms for streaming videos and music that produce contents or have signed contracts with third-party producers. The argument presented herein draws from previous research programs and, too, from the findings of surveys on streaming platforms, in particular subscription-based services like Netflix (BOUQUILLION 2019). The first part of this article argues that the platforms are working out strategies for shaping beliefs in the quality and efficiency of their algorithms for making recommendations. In the second part, we shall see how they do this so as to reinforce their position over users, other economic agents, public officials and regulatory authorities.

Recommendation systems, between the material and mental

Recommendation systems and, more broadly, all of big data and algorithms are both "*material*" and "*mental*", to borrow a distinction made by the anthropologist Maurice Godelier (1984). Technical systems for measurements and calculations are the output of various players' strategies, and these "sociotechnical arrangements", by being the subject of discourses, bear values and are underpinned by differing views of the culture and society, not to mention the different opinions about what the cultural industry can and should (a normative dimension) be in the "platform era". Parallel to the entertainment industry's discourse for promoting its products, experts and some researchers (above all, academics who are not critical) have, through their work and writings, not only shed light on the operations of big data but also helped construct an ideological dimension and belief in the power of the social effects of big data. In exculpation of researchers, let me recall that businessmen and, above all, platform operators keep trade secrets and only communicate the information consistent with their strategies for building an image of the might and effectiveness of their algorithms. As a consequence, researchers are forced to rely on the information communicated by these businesses and on the remarks of consultants or experts, who often have ties to business interests.

The ideological perspective is manifest when platform operators, like Netflix (DRUMOND *et al*. 2018), communicate about their recommendation systems, whether to acculturate users and persuade them to disclose more data or to brag about how their recommendation systems endorse "cultural diversity". This phrase refers not only to the quantity or variety of the contents offered but also to the capability of the algorithms to recommend completely unknown contents for users to discover and thus presumably boost the "consumption of diversity". Such is the case, for example, of Discover Weekly, Spotify's platform for streaming music.

Like most recommendation systems, Discover Weekly mixes "user-based" and "content-based" filtering. In the former, recommendations are based on the probability of similar tastes among individuals. For Spotify, user categories refer only to shared tastes in music, not to sociological similarities. In contrast, content-based filtering analyzes data related to sounds and/or texts, and then constructs categories of contents out of the comments made on all accessible media (websites, social networks, *etc*.). This method focuses on "top terms", the decisive factor for qualifying the contents about which comments have been made. Each top term is assigned a weight "*depending on the probability that someone will describe the recording artist or song by using this word*".[2] When different contents are the subject of the same comments (hence the same top terms), the assumption is made that they refer to the same category. Individuals who have consumed one or more contents from this category will then be proposed contents from the category. The analysis of sound data leads to defining categories of contents on the basis of music

[2] https://medium.com/delightblog/parlons-recommandation-partie-2-le-mod%C3%A8le-spotify-5173958a41b5

similarities between different contents. As a function of the contents previously consumed, users will be proposed other recordings that, though unfamiliar to them and possibly created by artists unknown to them, have a sound similar to contents that they have previously consumed. These arrangements are supposed to favor both the discovery of contents and a customization (thanks to the use of probabilities) of the offers made to users.

Variants exist. For instance, Netflix constructs categories of users by taking into account the information communicated by users in their "profiles". Likewise, users' opinions about, and ratings of, contents are taken into account.

Although various socioeconomic agents in e-marketing have presented big data as a factor in favor of cultural diversity and declared that a "*future in which innovations in recommendations will serve the cause of diversity seems to be dawning with more and more force*",[2] more critical, voices have been raised that point to various issues.

The claims of platform operators

Recommendation systems are the driving force in platforms and their creation of value. This raises three questions related to users, content-providers and public policies.

A first set of issues has to do with catching users. The efficiency of recommendation systems has been criticized, specifically their impact on the choices made by users and on the promotion of consumption patterns characterized by "cultural diversity". About music-streaming platforms, it has been said, "*The use of recommendations by users […] is still moderate, unequally distributed; and the uses for music discovery, when they orient users toward pieces of music in the mid-tail or long-tail, are still marginal. […] While the diversity of consumption on the platform is greater than on other media, listening is still strongly concentrated on the most popular recording artists*" (BEUSCART *et al*. 2019).

After all, the algorithms for making recommendations can be used for promotion purposes. As surveys have shown, recommendations, apart from questions directly related to their effectiveness, are a "*means for improving the global quality of the setup as perceived by consumers, even if they seldom use it*" (FARCHY *et al*. 2016). A recommendation system's quality is, therefore, a factor of distinction for standing out from competitors. Furthermore, the "*vertical integration of the production and distribution of contents […] tends to turn the audience's attention toward contents produced in house, rather than toward a diversified range of offers coming from a diversified range of sources*" (NAPOLI 2019). Platform operators promote their own, proprietary contents for various reasons, including the determination to draw attention to the successfulness of "their" contents.

A second issue for platforms is to attract content-providers or create a favorable balance of power with them. Thanks to the efficiency or the algorithms used for its recommendation engines, a platform suggests that those who provide it with contents will have more advantages than on other platforms — more income, improved targeting of consumers, etc. (BULLICH 2019). When platforms are able to obtain exclusivity, virtuous circles are generated between the quality of contents, the number of users and resources, all to the benefit of the most powerful platform operators and to the detriment of competition not only between platforms but also between platforms and content-providers. This leads us to agree with the following remark: "*The threat against cultural diversity might come less from the omnipotence of algorithms than from the eventual oligopoly that the small number of players in command of the data on consumer behavior patterns can form*" (FARCHY *et al*. 2016). This asymmetry is not related to recommendation systems alone. It also ensues from the financial power and international scope of the most powerful platform operators in their dealings with content-providers and with platform operators who have a national scope.

A third issue has to do with public policies. By emphasizing the efficiency of their recommendation engines in a context characterized by the abundance of contents, platform operators give the impression that public policy is obsolete, in particular the subsides given to production in the field of culture. Some players, including Netflix, have insisted on their contribution to diversity (in various senses of this word). They point to their production of films by directors who are immigrants or were born to immigrants, or they underscore that they boost the place of women or minorities in the productions they back. Netflix legitimates its position by highlighting its own productions that are not American or are in languages other than English, arguing that these productions have a worldwide audience. What Netflix communication campaigns target is not a group of nations or regions but a transnational territory constructed by the platform itself in line with the principles and world-view it promotes.

The reactions of regulatory authorities, of the institutions in charge of public policy and of researchers swing between two positions that are not mutually exclusive. The first is that big data and the thorough "transnationalization" of platforms and contents force us to radically reconsider public interventions and regulations. Philip Napoli (2019) has emphasized the need to regulate algorithms, which should be "*modified so as to more aggressively encourage the capacity for discovery and the consumption of diversified contents*". The second position is to extend former rules and regulations to new business activities while maintaining the same major objectives. In France, the example can be cited of a bill of law on the audiovisual industry that foresees extending to platform operators the obligations for funding creations in the national and European audiovisual industry, including the movies.

Conclusion

To formulate a criticism of platform strategies with regard to the algorithms used for recommendation systems, the economics of the cultural and entertainment industries must be seen in terms not just of an attention economics (SIMON 1971) — a viewpoint that focuses on the mental dimension of recommendation systems — but also of an economics of uncertainty, as authors working on the theory of the cultural industries have done (MIÈGE 1984, MOEGLIN 2007, CAVES 2000). Cultural practices are thus taken to be radically unforeseeable, what Caves has summarized as "Nobody knows". Furthermore, attention is turned to the question of how these industries are organized to place on the market more contents than consumers will ever be able to absorb. This alters our way of looking at this abundance of contents. From this perspective, the strategic dimension of recommendation systems is seen in contrast with its proclaimed function of matching supply and demand. We can then study how these arrangements, including the position adopted by platforms for promoting "overabundant" contents, alter the balance of power; and these platforms can then be placed in the long history of relations within the cultural and entertainment industries, alongside other industries whose core business is, fully or partly, in technology.

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