

Raymond Ernenwein

COMM 131P

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Prof. Gina Firenzi

What's Your Reality? The Impact of Algorithms on Digital Media

We currently live in a world where information has never been more readily available. Finding out about research that would have been hidden away in dusty library nooks or hearing about breaking news the second that someone learns about it is only one click away. Because of this massive amount of information that we are exposed to, there are services in place to curate specific feeds of information. News websites, search engines, and social media, all of which are streams of information for someone to interact with to learn about the world and the people around them. In order to better serve content to the consumer, the companies that run these websites began utilizing algorithms, trained off of the kinds of content that each user interacts with. A content feed with an algorithm will show posts that are better tailored to the interests of the user, and will help incentivize the user to stay on a specific platform for longer periods of time. With the use of an algorithm, no two feeds are the same. The uniqueness of a custom tailored feed can be a good thing, allowing for a personalized experience for the user, but can also be a way to shut out other sources of information.

Theme 1: Social Media Posts

Explanation: Social media sites have been increasingly utilized by many people worldwide to get their one stop fix of information. Whether it be updates on their favorite content creator, communities that align with one's hobbies, or news for legitimate publications, a social media "For You" or "Explore" has it all. However, the vast swaths of posts cannot be all

shown at once. A social media company makes money by keeping you on their platform consuming content, and they sort your feed in a specific way in order to keep you logged in. The company will employ algorithms to figure out what content a user engaged to generate the most amount of money. Because of this, no two social media feeds are the same, and some information can fall through the cracks.

Exhibit A:

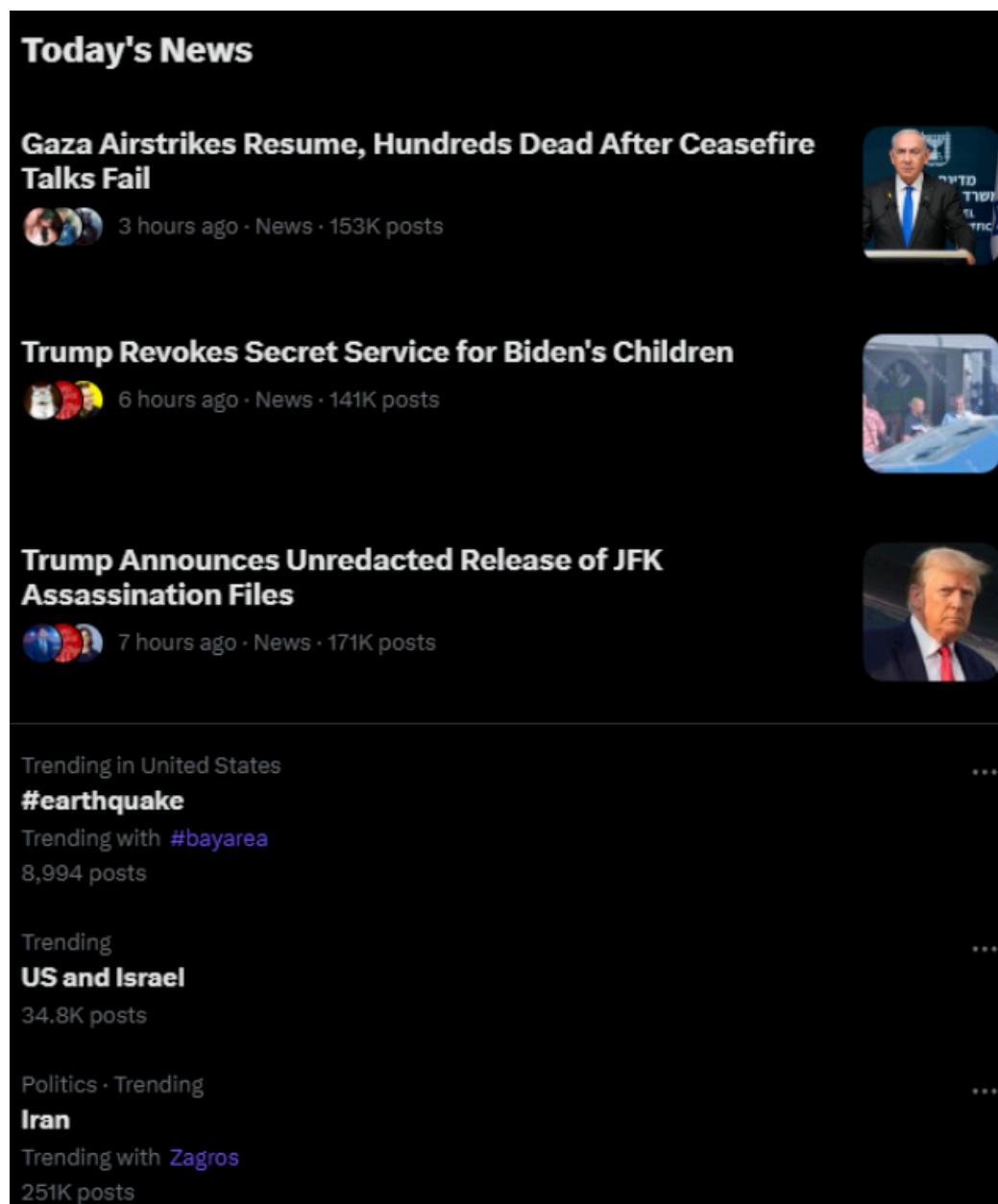
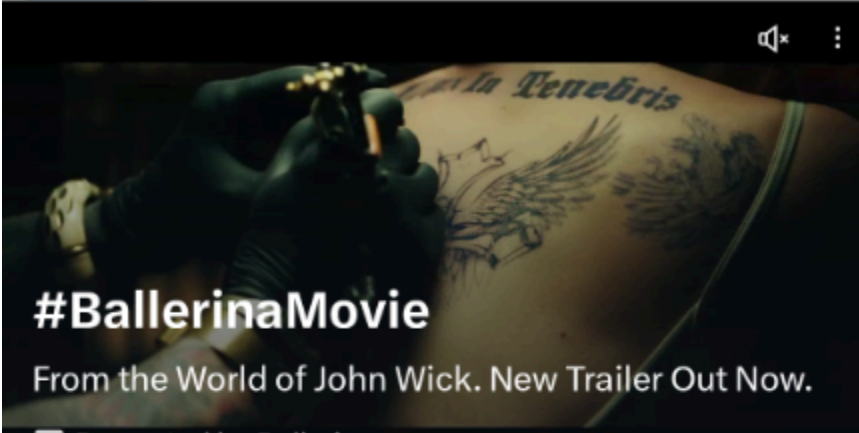


Exhibit B:

For You Trending News Sports Enter



#BallerinaMovie

From the World of John Wick. New Trailer Out Now.

 Promoted by Ballerina

The image shows a movie trailer for 'Ballerina'. It features a close-up of a person's back with a tattoo that says 'In Tenebris'. A hand is applying a tattoo. The text '#BallerinaMovie' is prominently displayed, followed by 'From the World of John Wick. New Trailer Out Now.' and a 'Promoted by Ballerina' tag.

Win a trip to Mars!
Official rules apply.

X BRACKET CHALLENGE →
PRESENTED BY Uber Eats

The image is a promotional banner for the 'X Bracket Challenge' presented by Uber Eats. It features a basketball and the text 'Win a trip to Mars!' and 'Official rules apply.'.

Today's News

SEC Drops Ripple XRP Appeal, Case Nears Conclusion



4 hours ago · News · 213K posts



JFK Files Released: CIA, Israel, and Assassination Theories



17 hours ago · News · 401K pos...



Crew-9 Astronauts Safely Return to Earth



16 hours ago · News · 316K pos...



Compare: Exhibit A and B are both screenshots from the Explore section of the social media platform X. Exhibit A is from my account while Exhibit B is from my peer, both taken from the week of March 19th. In both screenshots, despite our differences in the content we view, some pieces of information and content gets pushed to us regardless. Notably, the news of newly declassified files relating to the assassination of president John F. Kennedy. This piece of news was deemed so important by the algorithm that it was shown to both of us, regardless of our actual interest in the topic.

Contrast: Conversely, both exhibits show many examples of ways the algorithms differ in the content displayed to different audiences. In exhibit A, a headline reads “Trump revokes Secret Service for Biden’s children”, while exhibit B makes no mention of such a topic. Rather, in exhibit B, they are shown an advertisement for the movie Ballerina and a promotional contest to win a trip to Mars.

Theme 2: News Outlet Headlines

Explanation: The label, “The News”, is used in conversation to mean a place of trust and valuable information. For decades, they have been the place to listen in to hear what is going on all around the world. From local newspapers to international journalism companies, they all exist to convey what is happening to the reader in an informative fashion. With the onset of the internet, their goals have been the same, but have altered in execution slightly, due to the employment of similar algorithms being used in social media.

Exhibit C:

Wednesday, March 19, 2025
Today's Paper

The New York Times

S&P 500 +1.08% ↑

U.S. ▾ World ▾ Business ▾ Arts ▾ Lifestyle ▾ Opinion ▾ Audio ▾ Games ▾ Cooking ▾ Wirecutter ▾ The Athletic ▾

LIVE Trump Administration 1h ago Kennedy Files 1h ago Fed Meeting 2h ago

Judges Fear for Their Safety Amid a Wave of Threats

Federal judges worry that online threats against judges who oversee high-profile cases challenging Trump administration policies may lead to violence.

6 MIN READ

Donald Trump Jr. Mixes Business and Politics in Serbia Amid Local Protests

President Trump's oldest son visited Belgrade, the site of a Trump hotel project, and pushed back on calls for the country's president to resign.

6 MIN READ

White House Expected to Pause \$175 Million for Penn Over Transgender Policy

4 MIN READ

Tim Walz Attacks Musk With Language From the Trump Playbook

3 MIN READ



With Orders, Investigations and Innuendo, Trump and G.O.P. Aim to Cripple the Left

7 MIN READ



Here's What to Know About the Backlash Against Tesla

3 MIN READ

Humiliation as Propaganda: Detainee Videos Have a History in El Salvador

A video showing rough treatment of deportees over the weekend was an extraordinary depiction by U.S. standards, but not by El Salvador's.

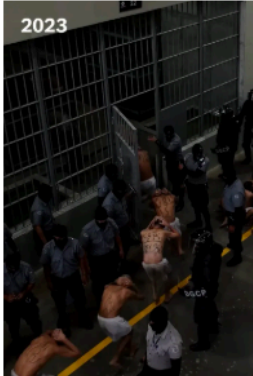
4 MIN READ

ANALYSIS

Defiance and Threats in Deportation Case Renew Fear of Constitutional Crisis

Legal scholars say the U.S. has reached a tipping point and that the question is not whether there is a crisis, but rather how much damage it will cause.

6 MIN READ



2025 2023

@nayfobuare via X and Nayfo Buile via YouTube

Judge Says Khalil's Deportation Case Can Be Heard in New Jersey

3 MIN READ

Judge Grants the Government Another Day to Share Details on Deportation Flights

2 MIN READ

Russia-Ukraine War Trump-Putin Call Photos Ukraine's Kursk Offensive Sexual Assault in the War

LIVE 1h ago

Zelensky Agrees to Limited Cease-Fire in Call With Trump

President Volodymyr Zelensky agreed to halt strikes on energy targets in a call with President Trump, who also suggested U.S. control of Ukrainian utilities.

See more updates >

Menaced by President Trump, Canada Prepares to Join E.U. Military Buildup

Canada's draft deal to participate in Europe's





Stephanie Zamboni

Millennials and Gen Z Are Fighting Again. This Time About Gym Clothes.

Are you team tight-on-tight or tight-on-baggy?

3 MIN READ



Immersed in Elegance as the World Rolls By: Luxury Sleeper Trains

5 MIN READ



On a Mountain in Utah, Modernism in Glass and Pine

3 MIN READ

Opinion

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS

The Entire Future of American Public Health Is at Risk

6 MIN READ

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

America Is Aggravating the World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis

4 MIN READ



Mahm Fozhat for The New York Times

JULIUS KREIN

Trump's Flood-the-Zone Strategy Has a Big Weakness

5 MIN READ

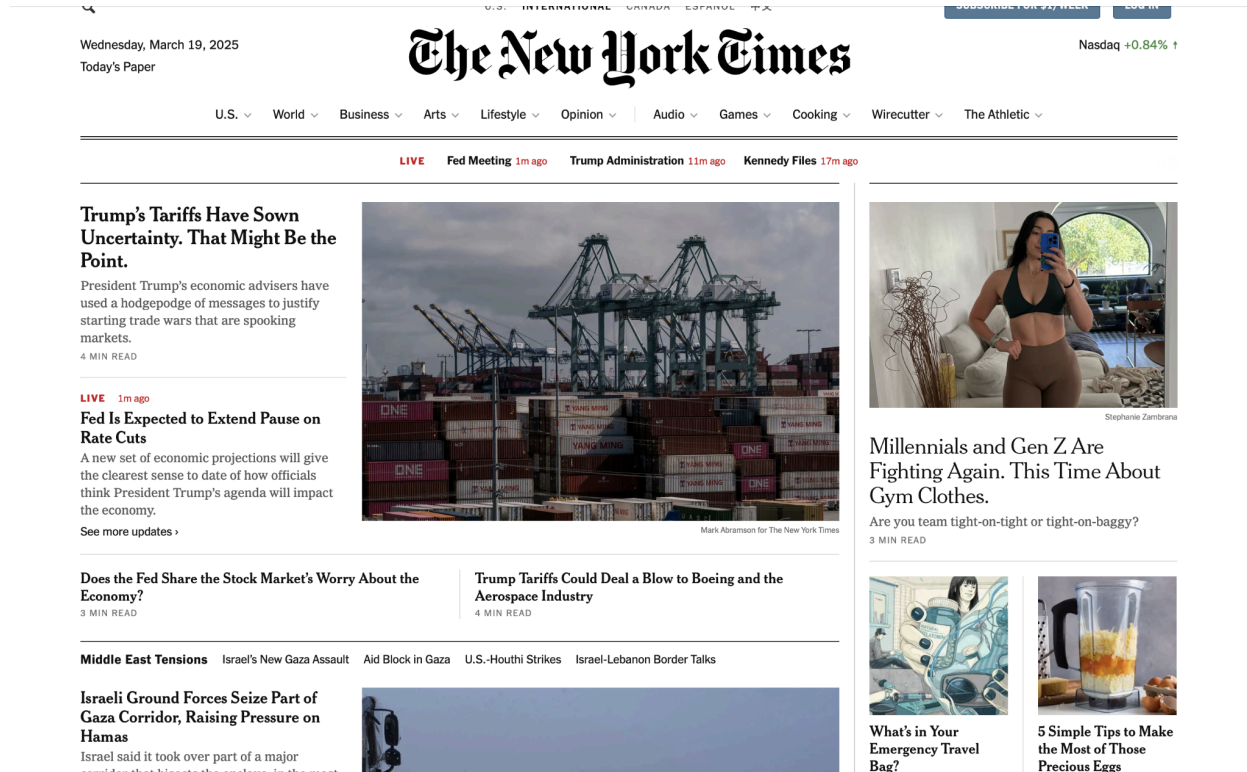
MICHELLE COTTLE

The Democratic Party's New Recruiter Has a Theory

12 MIN READ



Exhibit D:



Compare: Both exhibits are screenshots from the front page of The New York Times, acquired by my peers during the week of March 19th. In both screenshots, they share one article in particular, an article about how “Gen Z Are Fighting Again. This Time About Gym Clothes”. Perhaps the algorithm utilized by The New York Times picked up on the fact that the users were younger, possibly Gen Z, and pushed that article to the top of the news feed in order to entice them to interact with it.

Contrast: There is so much news being written about every day, so it makes sense that some will not be read by absolutely everyone. This is why the spots at the top of a news feed are reserved for only the most important and breaking news of the time, and both exhibits show two different articles. In exhibit C, the top article is titled “Judges Fear for Their Safety Amid Wave of Threats”, talking about judges across the country facing backlash for ruling on specific cases.

In exhibit D, the top article is “Trump Tariffs Have Sown Uncertainty. That Might Be the Point”, discussing how the seemingly random nature of the President’s trade policy might be to its advantage.

Societal Benefit: Technology has done so much good for so many people across the world. From being able to quickly send messages to others across the country with the radio, to being able to see and learn so many niche and important things via the internet. This benefit will only get better with time with more and more people getting connected and the technology getting better and better at sharing even more information. Another way that the utilization of specific platforms to get information, like social media, is that they can end up being a one-stop place for all one’s information needs. Someone can go to try and interact with one of their friends, and end up seeing some piece of important news going on, or learn about something that they have never heard of before. These moments are completely unique to social media sites. Another crucial component of technology intersecting with how people learn about the world around them is how each site, whether it be social media or a news agency, can give you completely different things. One social media platform might serve you this type of content, which can be different than the next social media site, while a news agency might talk about this story, and another news agency might be specifically skilled at talking about this kind of information. All this can lead to an interaction between people, where they bring up something that they heard and say “Did you hear about this?”, continuing the spread of new information. The future looks bright for the spread of information as well. The biggest social media platforms have hundreds of millions of active users every day talking about what is going on, hobbies, and creating communities around those things, and with blossoming technology, it will only get easier and easier to break down barriers to communication and get ideas across.

Societal Drawback: Technology, despite all the great quality of life that it has brought to so many people, does not come without serious drawbacks. Technologically assisted communication has been amazing for so many people, but not everyone has the necessary facilities to be able to access them. Not being supported with high speed internet in order to access social media and news sites that are full of ads, images and videos, needing to be loaded. This is a massive burden to people in impoverished communities and less well off countries. Similarly, the increasing adoption of social media and news agencies that employ algorithms designed to increase user retention poses an issue of what takes priority within the algorithm, and how it trains itself to determine that priority. A user's scrolling habits get tracked by the algorithm, even data from other websites and apps (all those cookies pop ups that appear as you enter a site) and are almost instantly fed back to you in the form of recommended content, which can be unnerving at least and an invasion of privacy at most. Due to the algorithm's goal of keeping a user engaged with the website, it will inevitably push certain kinds of content, and companies have found that the kinds of content that hold a user's attention the best is divisive, controversial, rage inducing content. This is why so many social media sites are credited with being "toxic" and so many news publications might use click-bait headlines, all to keep someone engaged. Furthermore, this behavioral bias of the algorithm can leave an impact on the people that use the website often, leading to the creation of echo chambers, exacerbating exclusivity and hostility towards other people online. Technology, when wielded nobly and utilised in good faith, is a very powerful tool, but it is often misused for non constructive gains and dividing people.