
Algorithms, Interfaces, and the Circulation of Information: Interrogating the Epistemological Challenges of Facebook

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Abstract: As social and political life increasingly takes place on social network sites, new epistemological questions have emerged. How can information disseminated through new media be understood and disentangled? How can potential hidden agendas or sources be identified? And what mechanisms govern what and how information is presented to the user? By drawing on existing research on the algorithms and interfaces underlying social network sites, this paper provides a discussion of Facebook and the epistemological challenges, potentials, and questions raised by the platform. The paper specifically discusses the ways in which interfaces shape how information can be accessed and processed by different kinds of users as well as the role of algorithms in pre-selecting what appears as representable information. A key argument of the paper is that Facebook, as a complex socio-technical network of human and non-human actors, has profound epistemological implications for how information can be accessed, understood, and circulated. In this sense, the user's potential acquisition of information is shaped and conditioned by the technological structure of the platform. Building on these arguments, the paper suggests that new epistemological challenges deserve more scholarly attention, as they hold wide implications for both researchers and users.

Keywords: Epistemology, Facebook, Social Network Sites, Algorithms, Interfaces, Information