

DARK FEEDS: MEDIATING THE UNKNOWN IN DIGITAL PLATFORMS

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is the new oil coursing through the veins of the digital world, from the disembodied algorithms that enable our daily rituals to the cryptographic security systems holding the keys to our personal data. Yet the most disruptive application of AI can be found in the simple recommendation programs of social media platforms that cobble together our personalised media feeds. Simultaneously, these unassuming images filling our screens are functioning for and against us by fuelling both unity and division, disseminating information and disinformation, and pitting “truth” against “truth”. In this paper, I draw on the media theory and philosophy of Vilém Flusser to argue that these images are the products of processes beyond human control and that this post-truth upheaval we are witnessing is being stimulated by unseen hands. As an illustrative example, I present the case of *Not For You* (Grosser, 2020), a media art piece designed to combat the problem of political filter bubbles emerging from personalised media feeds. By implementing a so-called “confusion” system designed to inhibit TikTok’s recommendation program, *Not For You* presents users of the platform with a feed that is no longer tailored to their interests and activities. Instead, it is composed of an incoherent smorgasbord of lesser known and outright unpopular content stemming from a variety of disparate, conflicting sources. The AI program is not simply malfunctioning but is, in fact, working “too well”. Rather than revealing just a minute slice, the program attempts to visualize the whole inconceivable mass of content existing on the platform; something so vast that it is immediately inaccessible to human perception. I, therefore, argue that such recommendation programs may be reconsidered as what Eugene Thacker terms *dark media*; technology that mediates between the known human world and the unknown non-human world that exists beyond understanding. Where Thacker ties this concept with the supernatural horror genre, I locate the unknown world in the quantum realm and identify dark media as those scientific programs that convert particles into images for our benefit. The confused media feed of *Not For You* makes this paradoxical mediation between worlds apparent while those “correctly” functioning recommendation programs mask their non-human nature behind illusions of coherence. Through personalised feeds that appear as continuous and meaningful representations of the world, these programs project outward fictional worlds constructed from unknowable processes occurring in the quantum realm. I conclude that as AI programs continue to permeate the digital world, dictating the flow of information between users and constructing the images that surround us, the unknown is coming to define the known.

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