

Andy Wu
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Dr. Wagner
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Social Media Algorithms Deserve More Ethical Scrutiny

Social media is often framed as a tool that simply gives users more of what they already want to see. On the surface, that sounds harmless, being considered as convenient. But that framing overlooks a more important reality, algorithms do not just reflect user preferences, they shape them. They influence what people pay attention to, what they believe, who they trust, and how they understand the world around them. For that reason, algorithmic manipulation is not just a technology issue. It is also a question of digital ethics, privacy, and power. Algorithms determine what appears in our feeds, what gains visibility, and what disappears. In doing so, they reward content that keeps users engaged for longer periods of time. From a business perspective, this model is understandable. However, in practice, it often means that emotionally charged, sensational, or polarizing content is more likely to rise to the top. The issue is not simply that harmful content exists online. It is that the design of many platforms can make that content more profitable.

One useful concept for understanding this issue is incentives. In the attention economy, platforms are rewarded for capturing and retaining user attention. That incentive structure helps explain why content that provokes strong emotional reactions often spreads more quickly than content that is nuanced, balanced, or carefully verified. In this sense, the ethical concern is structural, not accidental. The outcomes we see are often connected to the priorities built into the system itself.

Another important concept is transparency. Social media companies have significant influence over the digital spaces where people consume news, form opinions, and participate in public conversation. Yet most users have limited visibility into how algorithms work, why certain posts are prioritized, or how their own behavior is being tracked and used to shape future recommendations. When a system affects public understanding at this scale, but remains largely opaque to the people using it, trust becomes more difficult to sustain. This issue also raises broader concerns about power, risk, and harm. The influence of algorithms is not experienced equally. Younger users, for example, may be more vulnerable to systems that reinforce comparison, emotional dependency, or extreme content. Marginalized communities may also face greater risk when algorithms amplify harassment, stereotypes, or misinformation. What is often dismissed as “just content” can have real effects on mental health, social cohesion, and public discourse.

For organizations and professionals, the takeaway is clear: algorithms should not be treated as neutral tools. They are products of human decisions, business models, and institutional priorities. That means they deserve ethical scrutiny. Leaders in business and technology should be asking not only whether a system drives engagement, but also what behaviors it rewards, who benefits from its design, and who bears the consequences when it causes harm. Social media algorithms do more than organize information. They shape attention, influence behavior, and affect how people relate to one another. As these systems continue to play a larger role in everyday life, the conversation around them needs to move beyond convenience and efficiency. It needs to include accountability, transparency, and ethical responsibility.

