

The Insidious, Fake Intimacy of Algorithms

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The social internet is like a bustling marketplace of opinions and entertainment. Like shops in a mall, various apps such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok—promise to fulfill our insatiable hunger for more information, inspiration, and entertainment. Each app has its own flavor, but all share a core component that makes them work: “[the algorithm](#)”

No matter the social-media platform, the algorithms that determine what you see on your feeds are designed to deliver you content that keeps your attention and [keeps you scrolling](#) on that platform, as opposed to tapping over to another app or platform. The reasons the algorithms are engineered to keep your attention are many, but ultimately the longer a social-media app keeps the attention of users, the more engagement it creates, the more it learns about its users, and the more valuable its advertising opportunities become.

Why Do Algorithms Feel Creepy?

The *Wall Street Journal* recently [published a video](#) investigating how TikTok, a social-media platform with one of the most advanced algorithms, is able to detect our deepest desires. The *Journal* set up a number of “fake” accounts run by artificial intelligence, programmed to have certain interests.

In one example of an account that was designed to be interested in sad and depressing content, it only took TikTok a few minutes of watch time to recognize the interests of the account. By observing engaging actions taken by the fake account—every video watched and liked—it didn’t take long for 93 percent of the content TikTok served to the account to be related to depression or sadness.

In this (unfortunately quite common) example, a depressed user could be driven further into depression because the algorithm is more concerned with keeping the user interested than in alleviating depressive thoughts. Algorithms aren’t interested in helping us heal or become better. They’re more than happy to figure out exactly how we are broken, and what content our broken selves might find irresistible.

The main reason it feels creepy when algorithms know us *too* well is that we don’t like how it functions as a mirror into our souls. When we’re disturbed by what we see in our feeds, it may be because we’re confronted with the darkest depths of our desires, which we attempt to hide from even ourselves.

Algorithms Reveal and Rule Our Hearts

Algorithms make idolatrous inroads into our hearts because we spend more time scrolling social media than we do savoring Scripture. It isn’t too outrageous to say that, in some sense, we worship social-media algorithms. We may sing songs of praise to Instagram, but do we give it twice as much time as we give to God? Do we let the insights of a YouTuber trump the truth of God’s Word?

One reason we can come to “worship” algorithms is that they seem to know our deepest fears and desires as God might. God searches and knows our hearts ([Ps. 139:23](#); [Jer. 12:3](#); [Acts 15:8](#); [Rev. 2:23](#)), but so do the algorithms. In our beloved algorithms we find a perverse intimacy—one that *uses* our deepest fears and vulnerabilities for itself. In God we find true intimacy—one that *fulfills* our greatest longings.

Still, algorithms can deceive us into believing they care for us. Algorithms appear to serve us. They make us feel good or bad, whichever we prefer. They ask nothing of us, we think, but our time and attention. They make *us* the hero of our story—allowing all reality to be bent to our desires.

An algorithm promises to serve us, but in reality, it exists to serve itself. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sin and restore our relationship with him for eternity. Our algorithm may know us intimately, but it doesn't look like that. It will never sacrifice for us.

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The algorithm seizes our hearts for its good, but God seeks our hearts for our good. When we realize the outsized insight and influence algorithms have on our hearts and minds, we should flee these mathematical mediators of reality and pursue intimacy with people who point us to life in Christ.

Flee the Algorithms, Find People

How open are you with the people around you?

Do you tell your small group that you're always irrationally afraid that you're going to lose your job, or do you just smile and talk about how everything at work is fine? When you go to coffee with a friend, do you share your struggles with parenting teenagers, or do you just chitchat about the start of a new school year? Does your spouse know you struggle with lust? Instagram's algorithm does.

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Many of us have deeper relationships with the algorithms than with the people in our churches. This is not surprising. When we spend more time tapping on our screens than we do talking with our friends, our algorithms will know better than our loved ones do.

But through the secure setting of friendship, founded on the sacrificial love of Jesus, we can gain much more than being known. We can grow. The algorithms want us to believe the lie that wholeness is found by diving *into* our desires rather than being delivered *from* them. The algorithms want us to believe that what we need most is to be known. The truth is we need to be known *and* grown.

Don't be deceived by the fake intimacy and false promises of algorithms. Seek out real intimacy with in-the-flesh friends and family. Don't let algorithms shape your heart and steal your worship. Spend less time aimlessly scrolling and clicking, susceptible to whatever the algorithm wants to show you, and more time intentionally seeking God in prayer, Bible study, and worship.

Recognize this truth about online life today: while you might think you are the one consuming content, in reality, content is consuming you.

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