

Active Curation: Algorithmic Awareness for Cultural Commentary on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

This thesis examines how everyday social media users engage in curation practices to influence what news and information they see on their social feeds. It finds that cultural commentary content can act as a proxy for news on these platforms, contributing to public debate and the fifth estate.

While much research has explored the implications of algorithmically driven recommender systems for content personalisation and news visibility, this thesis investigates a gap in our understanding of how social media users understand and respond to algorithmic processes, customising their feed in their day-to-day curation practices on these platforms. It explores how a group of Australians aged 18–30 respond to algorithmic recommender systems and how effective their practices are in shaping their social feeds. The study used a mixed methods approach that included a digital ethnography of social media use and a comparative content analysis of social media news exposure and topics in the legacy news cycle.

This study develops a taxonomy of consumptive curation practices that users can engage in to influence their personalised social feeds. The study also examines users' motivations for this curation and how effective these are in filtering news and 'cultural commentary' content into or out of their feed.

The findings demonstrate that algorithmic literacy is a driver of active curation practices, where users consciously engage in practices designed to influence recommender processes that customise their social feed. They also demonstrate the prevalence of non-journalistic news-related content or 'cultural commentary' on social media platforms in the form of hot takes, memes, and satire, and how this cultural commentary can act as a proxy for

the news, even for users who are news avoidant. These findings address gaps in our understanding of news discovery and consumption on social media platforms, with implications for how news businesses can reach emerging news audiences.

Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Agata Stepnik

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Social media platforms now make up half of the ten most visited websites online, with YouTube coming in just behind the search giant Google, and Facebook rounding out the top three (Bianchi, 2023). Facebook alone had 2.96 billion active monthly users globally at the end of 2022, Instagram 2 billion, and TikTok 1 billion and growing (Dixon, 2023). While platforms like Facebook initially built their audiences around social connectivity between users, many people—myself included—have come to use social media for the purposes of entertainment, self-expression, the sharing of information (such as how-to instructions), and for breaking news stories (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Fu & Cook, 2021). It is the latter that is the focus of this thesis as social media platforms have become a popular source of news, especially for emerging news consumers (Newman et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022). The annual Digital News Report is a useful tool for examining trends related to access to news media; the Australian edition shows that in recent years social media has become the primary source of news for Generation Z (18–24 year olds), and the second most used source for Generation Y (24–40 year olds) (Park et al., 2022). The popularity of social platforms for accessing news within these demographics will undoubtedly have ramifications for legacy and born-digital¹ news media organisations in the future. However, we know relatively little about this emerging news consumer group's experience of news within the context of their overall, regular social media usage. In addition, it is unclear how their individual consumption

¹ The term 'legacy' is used to denote a news media organisation that was established before the introduction of the World Wide Web in either print, TV, or radio (Diel, 2017), while the term 'born-digital' is used for news media organisations that originated as online content (Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019).

practices impact whether news content is seen or not seen on their algorithmically personalised social feeds.

The first seed of inspiration for this thesis came from a 2011 TED talk video that I watched during my first semester at university, after I had returned as a postgraduate student. In this video, the activist and online civic engagement advocate Eli Pariser outlines his concept of filter bubbles, that is, how algorithmic personalisation on search and social media platforms might result in people only seeing content that already aligns with their beliefs and values at the expense of exposure to diverse opinions and content (Pariser, 2011a). He argues that these filter bubbles are the result of the many data points that we create when we are active online, and that are used to profile us and customise the content we then see, the actions we take; the links we click, the items we buy, and the social media accounts we comment on. Intrigued, I read his book on the same topic (Pariser, 2011b), and then moved on to other books within the field of critical algorithm studies such as those by Pasquale (2015) and Noble (2018). These works all argue that algorithmic logics determine what the end user sees and that end users are powerless against these systems. It was these texts that solidified my interest in algorithms and their often invisible influence on the people affected by them. Yet, I noted that many of the issues discussed within these works did not quite align with my own experiences in using algorithmically mediated platforms; moreover, they did not seem to account for the agency of individual users and their role in shaping these recommender processes (see e.g., Bruns, 2019). As Noble (2018) observed in the conclusion of her book, the very problem of programmed bias in Google search that inspired her critical research had already been *partially* addressed by the time she had completed writing the book due to user complaints about that search engine's discriminatory tendencies. In other words, algorithms change, but so too do the practices of the people who engage with them, and these

individuals are learning about algorithmic processes every time they enter something into the black box and see what comes out (Bucher, 2017; Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Willson, 2017).

My master's dissertation (Stepnik, 2018) started me on my journey toward this PhD research project. In that earlier study, I argued that contrary to the deterministic framing that underpins Pariser's filter bubble thesis, some participants do believe that they can actively curate their own feeds, thereby affecting what the algorithm surfaces. For instance, one participant in that master's project reported that they quite purposefully did not follow traditional news accounts, and mostly avoided engaging with news content shared by friends and family in an attempt to keep their social media feed news-free. Instead, when they would come across news topics that they wanted to know more about, they would break out of their self-imposed bubble and investigate these topics themselves. This initial evidence of user agency led me to develop this PhD project, wherein I investigate just how much agency people have and the extent to which they enact this agency within the recommender systems of social media platforms. In this endeavour, I have drawn upon the context of news and information curation practices to frame how effective these actions actually are in shaping a user's social feed. Such a focus is largely missing from the current media studies literature, as is an understanding of what content everyday users see and consume, how and why they curate their social feeds, and what role informal, non-journalistic content plays in keeping them informed of current events.

Addressing these issues will help identify how users acquire algorithmic awareness and digital literacy skills through their experience with social media platforms, and how both capacities might be improved.

With the above in mind, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How and why do users curate access to news on social media platforms through their consumption practices?
- 2) How do these curation practices affect the news and information they are exposed to on social media platforms?

To answer these questions, I use practice theory as a theoretical lens for examining the ways that social media users curate their social feeds, as well as users' motivations and expectations of how curation will affect the personalisation of these feeds by algorithmic recommender systems. I analyse these curation practices using socio-technical concepts such as affordances and discoverability. This provides a better understanding of users' actions on these platforms, their level of algorithmic literacy and the boundaries of their agency. I investigate the relationship between the social media user's algorithmic literacy and the curation practices they engage in to shape their social feed through a digital ethnography of thirteen ($n=13$) young adult news consumers' social media practices. The aim has been to provide rich data about a small group's social media curation practices rather than a statistically significant yet thin data sample based on a large-scale survey. I focused on young adult social media users in this project as their practices may provide insight into future news consumption practices on social media platforms as this group will eventually mature into the dominant news consumer audience, as discussed further in Chapter 2.

This thesis seeks to highlight the centrality of the user in recommender algorithm processes, and how this affects their engagement with news content on social media platforms. I will argue that each user's algorithmic literacy plays a foundational role in their social media practices, influencing how and when they engage with consumption and curation practices, which in turn affects the information that they see on their social feeds. DeVito defines algorithmic literacy as:

the capacity and opportunity to be aware of both the presence and impact of algorithmically-driven systems on self- or collaboratively-identified goals, and the capacity and opportunity to crystalize this understanding into a strategic use of these systems to accomplish said goals. (2021, p. 3)

Questions regarding how a user assesses the *quality* or *veracity* of information they have seen on their social media feed after engaging in curation practices is explicitly beyond the scope of this thesis project.

In this study, I present a ground-breaking taxonomy of active and passive curation practices that can influence or customise users' social feeds. I argue that whether a user actively or passively engages in these curation practices is dependent on that user's algorithmic literacy, their motivations for using social media in the moment, and how they expect the algorithm to respond to their actions. This study suggests that news avoidant users are likely to see 'cultural commentary' in their feed, even when they have demonstrated a disregard for traditional news in their consumption and curation practices. I define 'cultural commentary' as non-journalistic content on social media that is shared by a range of social media users (including friends and family as well as celebrities and influencers), and which follows platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015). Such commentary can directly or indirectly alert a user to a news event through analysis, opinion, or judgement on the event, and this type of content can take the form of casual or informal discussions, memes, hot takes, or satire. This finding has significant implications for the future of news production as news avoidance is on the rise, and emerging news consumers are likely to continue to use social media platforms as a primary source of news (Newman et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022).

1.2 Key terms in this thesis

I will take a moment here to clarify several of the terms that I will use—and already have used—in this thesis. I first define key terms related to the research questions before defining terms related to the operation of social media platforms. The section concludes with definitions of key terms related to news on social media platforms.

Terms related to the research questions

There are three key concepts within the research questions that, taken as stand-alone terms, may evoke different understandings dependent on the reader's disciplinary background, or indeed, the reader's familiarity with social media platforms and their related technologies. These are the concepts of algorithms and algorithmic recommender systems, the personalisation that results from algorithmic recommendation, and the curation that users may engage in when interacting with platforms that personalise content through these algorithmic recommender systems.

Algorithms are defined as “a procedure or set of rules used in calculation and problem-solving; (in later use spec.) a precisely defined set of mathematical or logical operations for the performance of a particular task” (Oxford, 2012b). As such, algorithms are not unique to computing and related technologies, with any set procedure to perform a task qualifying as an algorithm. However, algorithms have now become synonymous with platform processing of online data to predict what users will be interested in and to capitalise on this (Andrejevic, 2019; boyd & Crawford, 2012; Gillespie, 2014; Halavais, 2008; Just & Latzer, 2017; Kitchin, 2017; Noble, 2018; Pasquale, 2015; Willson, 2017).

In online contexts such as search and social media platforms, **recommender algorithm systems** are used “that study patterns of user behaviour to determine what someone will prefer from among a collection of ‘information’. By doing so, recommender systems essentially personalize the list of content that is offered to a user” (Helberger et al., 2018, p. 191). Each action a user takes on an online platform creates a data point to be processed by the algorithm, along with data points taken from the actions of other users, as well as other factors that the platform itself would like to prioritise (Mutz & Young, 2011; Pasquale, 2015). Clicking on links, liking a post, or even lingering on a screen create data points for interpretation.

Recommender algorithms allow platforms to automate the analysis, indexing, and filtering of the vast amounts of information users share on their servers so as to better direct their attention to content that meets their tastes and preferences (Isinkaye et al., 2015), resulting in **personalisation** of the content seen by the user. As van Dijk astutely notes in his law of the limits of attention:

Many people think that everything is available on the Internet as the number of senders and receivers is endless. They suppose that there is an audience for every new voice. However, this is a basic mistake. People forget that sending may be boundless, but attention is limited. It is easy to speak on the Internet, but difficult to be heard.
(2012, p. 40)

Personalisation through recommender algorithms is now the default view presented to users on the social media platforms described in this thesis. Personalisation underpins not only how these platforms organise content from the accounts that users follow or are connected to, but it also underpins how many social media platforms are able to remain profitable. By using the same data points collected to predict which content the user might be most interested in

seeing, platforms are able to create profiles of their users that can then be used for targeted advertising (Seaver, 2018).

Personalisation of the social feed falls under the banner of digital **curation**. Thorson and Wells define curation as "the production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of content" (2016, p 310). Davis (2017) presents a theoretical framework for understanding curation as it applies to digital spaces, delineating between **productive curation** engaged to decide what information or content to share online, and **consumptive curation** relating to the selection and filtering of content that is consumed. Davis' framework recognises how both humans and algorithms act to curate content consumed in digital spaces, which is explored further in this thesis.

Terms for social media operation

Perhaps the most widely used term in this thesis is **user**, also found in the phrases: end user, social media user, and everyday user. The term user represents a shift in terminology related to media consumption practices away from an 'the audience'² that relatively passively receives mass media content through film, TV, radio, print, and first-generation content on the World Wide Web, towards 'users' who can contribute content to platforms and interact with the content shared by others on them (Shirky, 2008; van Dijck, 2009). The term **end user** has its origins in computer science, and refers to the person who ultimately uses the software after it has been fully developed and made available to the public, thereby differentiating this type of user from the programmers and engineers who have designed and developed the software itself (Ko et al., 2011). In theory, while anyone could be seen as the

² The term 'audience' is still used in this thesis to refer to mass media audiences, however, it is also used at times to collectively refer to a group of users that follow a social media account, and, as a result, have the potential to see content from the account on their social feed.

end user of a software product, in reality only those who choose to use it are end users. Moreover, different software systems require different user skills: an end user of a word processing program will require different skills to an end user of a 3D graphics animation program, or an end user for a statistical analysis application.

The specific type of end user discussed in this thesis is the **social media user**, defined here as an individual who has created an account (or accounts) for a social media platform(s), has the skills to use the social media platform to share and consume content, and is identifiable by their unique account or user name.

I have further differentiated social media users into two main groups: **everyday users** and **content creators**. Everyday users—who make up the majority of all social media users on a platform—are best described as account holders who are not using social media for some kind of economic gain, in contrast to content creators, who are. The differences between everyday users and content creators are further discussed in Chapter 3.

I also frequently refer to the term **social feed** throughout this thesis. A social feed is the main screen presented to everyday users when they first login to a social media platform or open its app. It contains a scrolling list of posts from different accounts—both those followed by the user as well as those recommended to them by the recommender algorithm, for example, sponsored posts and advertisements. This feed is where personalisation is experienced on social media platforms—that is, where one user's feed differs from that of another user's—and constitutes what is seen when the user views their account profile. While each platform has a different name for its main social feed (e.g., Facebook's *News Feed* and TikTok's *For You Page*), for the most part these platform feeds share several basic elements: posts, ads, and sponsored content. Users are able to scroll through these feeds by swiping up or down, with a mix of followed and recommended content shown. While some social media

platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, offer a separate feed for exploring content from accounts the user does not follow, TikTok mixes this content into its main feed, offering users a separate For You feed that *only* shows content from accounts that the user follows.

Another two terms that are frequently used throughout this thesis are **post** and **content**. A social media post is a discreet container for content that is shared by social media users—both everyday users and content creators—on their platform feeds. Social media posts may contain any type of media that the platform supports, including the ability to write, upload, livestream and instantly publish text, hyperlinks, images, and video. Posts include sub-containers for what Hayes et al. (2016) call “paralinguistic digital affordances” (PDA). These PDAs, also known as likes or favourites (as discussed further in Chapter 5), allow for discussion of the source content in the form of comments. Both the PDA and comment sub-containers afford the everyday user basic metrics to see who has interacted with their content in these specific ways, but they do not tell the user whose social feeds the post has been shown on. **Content** on social media refers to the text, multimedia, and/or external links that a user can share in posts from their account and it can be presented to a public, semi-public, or private audience (boyd & Ellison, 2007). That is, depending on the social media platform, the account holder may be able to restrict or limit who can see the post, who can comment on it, and who can share it further. These choices can affect the size of the users’ potential audience and the scope of this audiences’ engagement with the content as users might trade privacy for visibility, or vice versa.

As noted in the previous section, **cultural commentary** takes the form of informally exchanged, vernacular content that is not framed as traditional news stories, although it can inform users about current events. This type of commentary consists of posts from everyday users as well as from public figures who are commenting on socially significant information

in some way. Whereas journalists, brands, celebrities, influencers, and other public figures may have large audiences on social media platforms—allowing their cultural commentary to be seen by a wide audience—cultural commentary emanating from everyday users can also have an influence on the ideas and views of others. While the typical audience for an everyday user’s post may be small, if the post is public and it resonates with a wider audience, it has the potential to go ‘viral’. Even private posts may gain wider circulation as cultural commentary when shared publicly, as evidenced by the proliferation of Twitter screenshots posted as memes on other platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Farokhmanesh, 2018). It is important to note that even when everyday users’ post exposure is limited to their social network of friends and family, they are still able to inform these users about issues and current affairs in a two-step information flow process (Wunderlich et al., 2022).

Most social media platforms make it as easy as possible for users to share, remix, or further remediate other user’s content. In this thesis, I use terms that further differentiate the origin of this content. **Source content** refers to original media that was either created by the account holder, or that is affiliated with it in some direct way, such as a news story created by a journalist that is shared by the publishing news organisation’s account. This type of content can include content that was created in the spur of the moment, such as when a user types up their thoughts in app, or takes and shares a photo or video, or starts an unscripted livestream on a social media platform. It can also include content that is prepared externally and then posted on social media, such as the news story example above.

Source content can also refer to information related to external websites linked within a post, which at times may be the entirety of the post’s content. Social media platforms generally make it easy for users to link to external sources, for example, by automating the

creation of a preview picture and excerpt of text from the linked webpage. Instagram is a notable exception as it limits users to sharing a single link within the user profile and disables both the hyperlink and copy text functionality if a Universal Resource Locator (URL, or web address) is shared within the text of a post or comment. The process of linking enables a variety of functions for different users: a news media organisation can direct traffic to a news piece published on their website; an influencer can direct users to their shopfront or blog; a restaurant can share their new menu; or an everyday user can point to a movie trailer hosted on YouTube they are excited about. All of these can happen with or without additional standfirst³ or commentary.

Treating a post as a container separate from the source content allows us to consider both *where the information has come from* as well as *how users are exposed to this information*. For example, while the source content might be a weblink to a BBC news article, the reason a user is seeing it on their social feed might be due to a friend sharing a link to it in a post, or because the user follows the BBC. In such a case, the source content remains the same, but how it was discovered by the end user is different, and this difference is significant when investigating incidental news exposure and news avoidance.

Source content also differs from the **source of information**, which can make determining who to attribute source content to a fraught exercise. This is especially the case for memes, images, and even text and video content where it is not clear who originally created this content. While it may be clear that a news organisation created the native video content that is shared on their own social media account, or that an everyday user has not

³ **Standfirsts**, also called ‘precedes’, are short summaries of news stories that appear below the headline and before the main text in the news article (Martin & Dwyer, 2019). On social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, it is common to see this ‘drop head’, as it is also known, included as text in a post that links out to a news story, with most platforms automatically displaying the article’s headline, a hero image, and a standfirst in the post.

created the weblink they have just shared to a news organisation's report, it is less easy to ascertain where text copied from an existing source such as a book or song lyrics, or images taken from a search engine, originated.

I further categorise posts into two main types depending on how the source content is presented: primary posts and secondary posts. A **primary post** is the original container within which source content such as text, image, video, or web link has been uploaded to, and presented on, the social media platform. Primary posts can be published under the account of the user or may be added to open or closed groups on platforms that support these spaces, such as Facebook. A **secondary post** shares a primary post using a different account; they are more commonly referred to as a 're-share' or a 're-tweet', or on TikTok as a 'duet' (where primary and secondary content plays at the same time) or a 'stitch' (where the secondary post contributes new content to a primary post).

The key visual difference between primary and secondary posts is that they both have their own containers, with the primary post nested within the secondary post. This nesting maintains the hypertextual attribution to the source content, allowing other users to see where the source content came from, and generally allows them to then click through to the primary post or primary post account profile. As a result, the primary post becomes the source content for the secondary post. The secondary post container is thus functionally the same as the primary post container as it allows the user to contribute their own commentary when sharing the primary post, and it provides the same sub-containers for user interactions through PDAs and comments. It is important that these sub-containers are separate to those of the primary post as this allows a user to 'like' the secondary post without contributing a 'like' to the primary post, and to comment on the secondary post without it also appearing on the primary post. Secondary posts can be a powerful way to amplify the voices of others, especially the

primary posts of everyday users or activists with small audiences when these posts are re-shared by celebrities, influencers, and other public figures with much larger followings.

As mentioned above, post containers allow users to leave **comments** on their own and other social media posts, which can appear as either a threaded conversation (such as on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube) or as a new post that links to a threaded conversation (Twitter). The comments section of any social media post can contain cultural commentary from other users in response to the post, including primary posts from news media organisations or other accounts with large audiences, or posts within open and closed group pages with large followings. Within these contexts, an individual user can contribute their own cultural commentary on an event or situation that has been highlighted by others, and this allows them to transcend the bounds of their own regular personal network to reach a potentially much wider audience, although this reach can only extend to that segment of the wider audience that actually bothers to open and read the comments under social media posts. Nevertheless, the potential reach and impact of social media post comments via social media flows should not be underestimated.

Throughout this thesis I make repeat reference to the concept of information flows. The word **flow** as used in this term is best articulated by Nissenbaum in her presentation of the concept of contextual integrity:

I chose flow to serve as a neutral term to refer to the passage or transmission of information or data from party (or parties) to party (or parties). Each of the alternative terms I considered, such as share, collect, disseminate, distribute, transmit, receive, or communicate, was richer in meaning than flow, and their augmented meanings bundle assumptions that theory requires be made explicit. (2019, p. 225)

As used in this thesis, information flows can refer to both formally reported news from traditional media organisations, or any other movement of information from one entity to another that informs the recipient, including entertainment and personal news. It is also used here as a general descriptor for information movement, consumption, and sharing on social media platforms, ideas that are central to this thesis.

News on social media related terms

As the main focus of this thesis is the experiences of young adult social media users with news and informative content on social media platforms, it is critical to be clear about what is meant by these terms in this context. In this thesis, I use the definition of **news content** as referenced in the Australian Government's *Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021*:

content that reports, investigates or explains:

(a) issues or events that are relevant in engaging Australians in public debate and in informing democratic decision-making; or

(b) current issues or events of public significance for Australians at a local, regional or national level.

(...)

content that reports, investigates or explains current issues or 2 events of interest to Australians. (p. 3-4)

In the context of social media, news content also refers to professionally produced news articles and video content, usually shared on social media platforms as links to published news stories, or as native video that has been created and published onto the platform by

established journalists or news media organisations. As will be discussed at length in Chapter 2, the literature dealing with the news on social media platforms of course tends to focus on this type of content, often to the exclusion of other forms of informative content that may alert social media users to news events. I also explore in detail how news itself is defined as a media product in Chapter 2.

While news is certainly investigated in this thesis, the aim is to also examine other forms of informative content such as **cultural commentary**, as discussed above. I decided during the data collection phase of this project to include this alternative type of content to establish the different ways in which an individual can encounter information related to topical events on social media platforms.

This thesis also refers to **news seeking** and **news avoidant** users. **News seeking** users are those who choose to follow professional news media accounts on social media platforms and who take the time to consume or engage with news content when they see it on their social feed. On the other hand, **news avoidant** users do not follow professional news media accounts, and do not consume or engage with news content when they come across it.

Nonetheless, news avoidant users can still be **incidentally exposed** to news and cultural commentary content on social media platforms. Incidental news exposure occurs when the user sees news content on their social feed even though they have taken steps to avoid seeing it. These users might be incidentally exposed to news content when someone within their social network has shared it, the news organisation has paid the platform to promote the content to users within a specific demographic that includes them, or because the platform recommender system has suggested it to the user based on their, and other similar users', previous platform behaviours.

1.3 Thesis outline

This research project explores how a group of everyday users of algorithmically mediated social media platforms in Australia enact curatorial agency while engaging with these platforms, and how their curation practices affect the amount of news and cultural commentary content they are exposed to through these digital platforms. This introductory chapter has presented the research questions, my motivations for embarking on this research project, as well as an overview of key terms used throughout the thesis that are specific to social media use and news consumption on these platforms. I have briefly articulated the gaps within the literature that I aim to address, specifically the need to investigate the role of the user in influencing algorithmic recommender processes that personalise the social feed, and to identify the curation practices everyday users engage to influence the content they see in their personalised feed. In this thesis, I consider how and why these curation practices are employed, and the effectiveness of these practices in making news and other informative content visible. I argue that a user's level of algorithmic literacy correlates with their capacity to exert agency within the recommender systems of social media platforms. They do this by using available platform affordances to engage in curation practices that either invite similar content into their feed, or dissuade similar content from being shown, thereby customising the amount and type of news and cultural commentary content that they see on their news feed. I identify two key types of practices used to enact agency within recommender systems: active curation and passive curation. My results show how users are exposed to 'ambient journalism' (Hermida, 2010) even when they actively seek to dissuade platforms from exposing them to news content, and how that cultural commentary can contribute to a social

media user's participation in a fifth estate function (Dutton, 2009). Finally, I argue for a recentring of users in studies of algorithmic recommendation.

The need for this research is explored through the literature review presented in Chapter 2. This chapter provides a critical analysis of the existing literature which covers a wide range of issues related to the creation, dissemination, and consumption of news on social media platforms, commencing with a discussion of why news on social media is such a well-researched field of study. The chapter identifies the gaps in the scholarly work that centre on social media platforms and their related technologies. It examines how news on social media platforms has been framed and studied, the role of recommender algorithms on social media platforms, and the effect that personalisation has on news visibility. The chapter reviews the literature that defines news so as to identify professional news' relevance to how informative content flows on social media platforms. The chapter also presents a critique of studies that have investigated how social media users experience news on social media platforms, the impact that algorithmic awareness has on social media practices, and how this awareness influences users in their negotiation with platform algorithms to curate the content they consume. Finally, the last section, which briefly reviews the literature specific to youth experiences of social media platforms, provides support for this thesis' focus on young adult social media users.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical frameworks used to formulate the plan of inquiry and analysis. It begins with an overview of practice theory as it relates to "... the empirical study of methods that individuals use to give sense to and at the same time to accomplish their daily actions: communicating, making decisions, and reasoning" (Coulon, 1995, p. 15). It then presents theories of affordances, curation, and algorithmic literacy relevant to

social media platforms that have shaped the data collection methods and the grounded theory approach to data analysis used in this thesis.

In Chapter 4, I outline the methodological approach to the research project, which employs mixed methods of data gathering and analysis. The main methodology used is digital ethnography, which allows for the observation of a user's online experiences within the very context in which it is enacted while avoiding the omissions and distortions that may otherwise occur in data that is self-reported by the research cohort. The mixed method data collection structure is then presented in detail. It includes: direct observation of participants by joining their social networks, semi-structured interviews, media go-alongs, personal archives in the form of screenshots, and a comparison of news topics seen by research participants on social media platforms with news stories as reported in the mainstream media. Particular attention is given to the ethical considerations related to the direct observation of users' social media content, and the need to protect the contextual integrity of 3rd party user data. Finally, an overview of the data analysis process is provided, which comprises a grounded theory approach.

Two main themes emerged from the data analysis, as presented in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, I present a taxonomy of the consumptive curation practices in which participants engaged during the data collection period, which are categorised along two different axes. The first captures the effect that the curation practice has on the user's social feed, which involves a user either **inviting** content to be shown in their feed, or **dissuading** it from appearing. Curation practices are also categorised based on how consciously participants enacted these practices of inviting or dissuading, resulting in the conceptualisation of **active and passive curation** practices, which directly link algorithmic literacy to the user's desires and expectations, as well as to their active curation practices.

In Chapter 6, I present findings that support a robust ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010) environment on social media, in which cultural commentary from non-journalistic sources in the form of memes, hot takes, and casual discussions acts as a proxy for news content for many of the participants in the study. The chapter also presents findings which demonstrate that this type of content was continuously available to participants, even after they had actively curated their social feeds to avoid professional news content. Also discussed is the role of cultural commentary in public debate, and how this content supports an expansion of the fifth estate (Dutton, 2009).

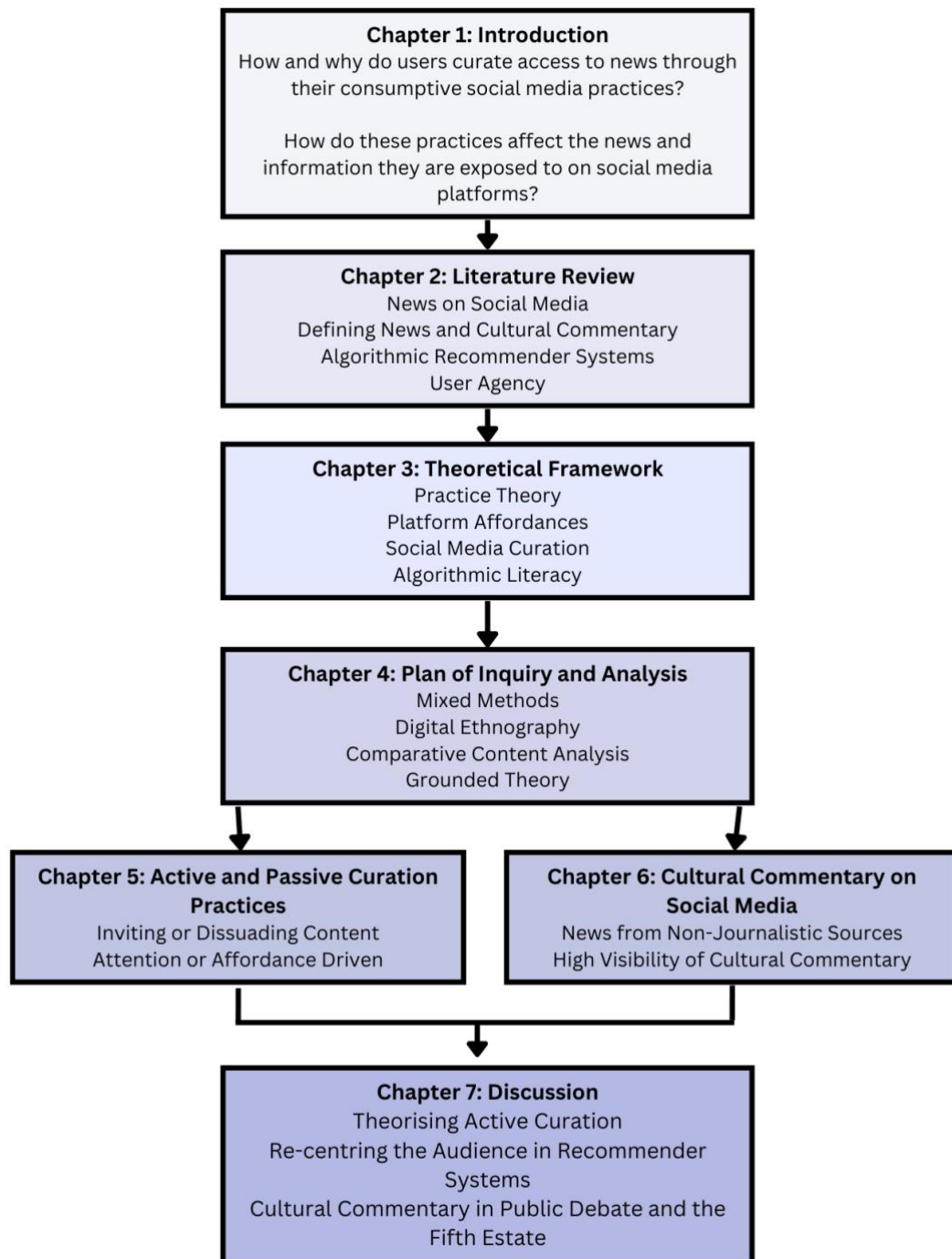
I discuss the wider significance of these findings in Chapter 7. In this chapter, I argue that active curation practices are a direct response to the personalised social feeds created by recommender algorithms in the absence of chronological social feed options. I then argue for a re-centring of the user when examining recommender algorithm processes, which opens new avenues for future research into news consumption on social media platforms. Finally, I present arguments for examining cultural commentary content in ambient journalism environments as the embodiment of the fifth estate, where all social media users can potentially hold power to account.

I conclude this thesis in Chapter 8, in which a holistic overview of the research is presented. This chapter includes a discussion of the project's limitations and how these might be addressed in future research studies. It also makes suggestions for how active curation practices can be used as a springboard for building algorithmic awareness, and how an exploration of cultural commentary content can factor into the future of news media production for social media audiences. I close out the thesis by repositioning the findings as a starting point for further lines of inquiry into news consumption practices on social media

platforms, user agency against recommender algorithms, and the role of everyday social media users in the two-step flow of informative information.

Figure **1-1** provides a visual overview of Chapters 1 to 7, which summarises the contribution of each chapter to the thesis.

Figure 1-1: Overview of Thesis Chapters



Chapter 2: Social media, the news, and user agency

2.1 Introduction

This thesis explores everyday users' consumption and curation practices on social media platforms and how they mediate news and socially significant information, such as cultural commentary from friends, family, and other non-journalistic sources. It investigates how impactful user agency is against the logic of platform recommender algorithms, and establishes how and where these users prefer to engage with news and cultural commentary content. In this chapter, I review the literature on social media and news consumption, with a focus on research into algorithmically mediated news exposure and news avoidance, to establish the gaps I will be addressing in this study.

This chapter argues that media studies scholars need to enhance their understanding of how and why people curate news and information flows on social media. It proposes that in a social media context, where recommender algorithms act as gateways to, and gatekeepers of, information, it is necessary to analyse users' algorithmic literacy to better understand aspects of their news exposure. Importantly, this chapter argues that we need a new definition of news to more fully appreciate how digital news audiences—especially news avoidant audiences—keep up-to-date with the world around them on platforms that have been primarily designed and used for social interaction with friends and acquaintances. In this respect, it provides a scholarly grounding for my definition of cultural commentary.

The chapter is organised into six main conceptual sections. The first section explores literature that addresses the role of news media in providing information to citizens in a democracy, and how this role has been challenged by the growth of social media platforms as a news distribution channel and proxy public sphere. I argue that research into news

consumption on social media platforms requires further attention to algorithmic personalisation and how news is defined. In the second section, I analyse literature that explores news from the perspective of not only the users consuming it, but also of those who are either avoiding it or are incidentally exposed to it on social media platforms. The third section turns to the changing nature of what constitutes news on social media platforms, and how non-journalistic sources contribute to the ambient news environments of social media platforms, which leads to my definition of cultural commentary. The fourth section explores algorithms as part of recommender systems on social media platforms, and reviews the literature that examines the full social media contexts that users experience as well as their understanding of platform algorithms. This leads into the fifth section, which explores user agency in recommender systems and introduces scholarly works that investigate how and why users curate their social media news feeds as well as how algorithmic literacy affects these practices. The final section outlines why I have chosen to focus my ethnographic attention on the curation practices of young Australian adults.

2.2 Framing the significance of news research

In the fields of media studies and media policy, the normative assumption is that news consumption is the foundation of a functioning democracy (Fenton, 2009). This proposal is based on the liberal theory that the press acts in four key democratic functions: as a means of keeping the public informed on current events; as a watchdog against government corruption; as a means of communicating about public debate; and as a means of then reporting public opinion (Christians et al., 2010; Curran, 2014, pp. 30–31; Curran & Seaton, 2003, p. 341).

These four functions are encapsulated in Habermas' concept of the public sphere, "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (1974, p. 49). A central tenet of the public sphere is that this realm is not only accessible to

all citizens, but that they have access to ideas and opinions so that they can contribute to timely debates from a position of knowledge (Habermas, 1974; Habermas, 1989). It is in this respect that scholars argue that the news media contributes centrally to the public sphere: by providing a breadth of information—free from interference or censorship from governments—in their role as the fourth estate (Christians et al., 2010; Curran, 2014; Lichtenberg, 1987). This presumption forms the basis of news media privilege, such as journalists being protected by shield laws from revealing their sources, and news media regulation as embodied by journalistic standards and ethics policies (Christians et al., 2010). As such, Habermas’s concept of the public sphere has become shorthand for articulating the legacy news media’s communicative contribution to a democracy, as observed by Ferree et al.: “Democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process” (2002, p. 289). For this reason, studies of news consumption are often undertaken to understand how changing tastes and behaviours affect political participation (for examples, see Bennett, 2012; Bode, 2016; Edgerly et al., 2018; Feezell, 2018; Goyanes et al., 2023; Holt et al., 2013; Kaiser et al., 2018; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021).

However, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, public communication is no longer dominated by legacy news organisations through mass media channels. The rise of social media platforms has provided new, accessible, and user generated spaces for public exchange and debate, allowing end users to discover news and informative content from a range of professional and amateur sources, which are situated within a stream of content that also contains personal communications, social updates, marketing, and entertainment. Notably, digital gatekeepers—rather than human gatekeepers, such as news editors and producers—now use algorithms to position news alongside these other types of content in a

user's personalised social feed, filtering specific stories for mass publication or broadcast (Thurman et al., 2019). Social media platforms also afford users indexing functions such as hashtags that allow temporal publics to form around issues or causes (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015). This has led many scholars to suggest that social media platforms can be seen as a digital public sphere (Staab & Thiel, 2022), a series of sphericules (Gitlin, 1998; Bruns & Highfield, 2016), or private spheres that retain "the familiarity of the private and the reach of the public" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 141).

When social media platforms are equated with some form of digital public sphere or spheres in this way, it becomes possible to explore how much agency everyday citizens have to discover news and information in these environments, and to better understand how news access and consumption is changing within highly personalised contexts. Over the last two decades conceptualisations of social media (also called social networking sites) have centred on the interactivity between two users' social media accounts that is afforded by these digital platforms (Aichner et al., 2021). However, over time, scholars have refined definitions of social media to reflect the evolution of users' experiences of these platforms, moving from an earlier emphasis on social connectivity of individual people towards later definitions that make space for parasocial⁴ and commercial relationships, as well as information exchange and e-commerce (Aichner et al., 2021; Ellison & boyd, 2013). For the purpose of this thesis, I will be drawing on the definition of a social media platform first proposed by Ellison and boyd in their work on social networking, as a:

⁴ Parasocial relationships are one-sided and imagined, existing where a celebrity or public figure communicates publicly in an informal manner, which can cause a member of the audience to feel as though they are intimately acquainted with the celebrity or public figure, even though the two have never met (Perse & Rubin, 1989). In more recent years, the term has become popular as a descriptor for the relationship between social media influencers, celebrities, and other public figures and their audiences on these platforms (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

networked communication platform in which participants 1) have *uniquely identifiable profiles* that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with *streams of user-generated content* provided by their connections on the site. (2013, p. 158, emphasis in original)

This definition is useful as it acknowledges—without entering into a debate about different genres of social media—the broad characterisation of these applications: the user, their connections to other users (everyday users and content creators), as well as the different types of content that they can engage with on these platforms (see Wolf et al., 2018). Ultimately, social media platforms are spaces designed for different types of social connection (including work, marketing, and entertainment) in which platform algorithms create individual social feeds for each user based on their inferred interests, previous behaviour, the people that they are connected to, and what is popular or trending at the time. In this, social media platforms present very different environments for public exchange and debate than are available offline.

In viewing social media platforms as a series of public spheres, this thesis acknowledges the very valid critiques of the Habermasian public sphere raised by scholars such as Fraser (1990) and Benhabib (1997) who argue that Habermas's concept excludes those groups marginalised from public sphere participation, notably women, non-white, and LGBTQI+ peoples. These exclusionary aspects of the traditional public sphere highlight the need to study just how much agency users have in the discovery, access, and discussion of socially important information in digital public spheres, to ensure that offline barriers to participation are not replicated online, or new barriers erected (Carlson & Frazer, 2018; Iosifidis, 2011; Kruse et al., 2018; Papacharissi, 2008, 2010). For example, Papacharissi

(2002) notes that there is a tendency—inaccurately in her view—to regard the early Internet as a public online space, where anyone could access information so long as they had a computer and Internet connection, and for it to be equated with the public sphere regardless of how inclusive, or otherwise, that space was.

Despite these reservations, the concept of a public sphere or *sphericules* has maintained relevance in discussions of functioning democracy today, with scholars arguing that some kind of publicly accessible space must exist for all people—be they monied or destitute, educated or ignorant, male or other—to participate in the formation of public opinion (Bruns, 2018; Fraser, 1990). Moreover, it is argued that legacy news media in particular is still critical to a functioning democracy (Curran, 2014; Helberger, 2019; Schudson, 2013, 2020). Viewed as a framework rather than a rigid construct (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Fuchs, 2014a), the concept of public spheres is relevant for this thesis, which explores how and where individuals access the information encountered online that shapes their personal opinions, as well as how these opinions are subsequently shared and deliberated in the modern online mediated environments of social media platforms.

Examining news and information access on these platforms is important because they afford everyday users a means to not just access and share ideas, but also to create informative content themselves. They also afford spaces for engaging in public debate, contributing to the formation of public opinion, and support the realisation of “public *sphericules*” (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Cunningham, 2001), where “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67) can form to deliberate counter-discourses in parallel to the dominant discourse. In this thesis, social media platforms are seen as operating as environments that support public sphere-like exchanges, which may or may not centre on traditional news media stories: social media users can consume and contribute to content that

discusses topical events; more easily presenting perspectives beyond those covered by mainstream news media outlets; and create new practices around the consumption of news that may exclude professional news media content.

Yet, social media platforms can also exhibit many of the exclusionary characteristics of public spheres raised by Fraser and Benhabib. For example, they can drive the formation of negative subaltern counterpublics through the toxic technocultures that exist on many social platforms (Benton et al., 2022; Duguay et al., 2020; Massanari, 2017). They can also atomise publics in algorithmically mediating personalised news flows, creating unique social feeds based on the user's preferences, previous activity, and platform priorities (Boczkowski et al., 2018) and can marshal affective publics that materialise uniquely around social networks (Papacharissi, 2014). These constitute significant differences to the public assembled by legacy channels of mass media (such as radio, print, and TV) where news can reliably be found at scheduled times or on specific pages or sections. As it is, recommender algorithms may or may not show legacy news content to specific users, suggesting that, in this study I cannot assume that the news media are core to the social media consumption or curation practices of young adult users.

Thus, while both social media platforms and traditional mass media channels are able to contribute to democratic processes by providing access to news and informative content, the media studies literature suggests that social media platforms also provide a site for public exchange of, and debate about ideas within personally constructed social networks. Given the major role played by algorithms in mediating news and making information visible on social media feeds, it is important to investigate the agency that users have on social media platforms that allows them to contribute to, and benefit from, these digital public spheres.

2.3 News consumption, incidental exposure, and news avoidance on social media platforms

Much of what we know about news consumption on social media platforms is shaped by large surveys of traditional news consumption. Perhaps the most significant of these surveys is the frequently cited annual Digital News Reports produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which began in 2012 (for recent examples, see Newman et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). The surveys provide a representative sample of news consumption behaviours across all news mediums, including legacy formats such as print, radio, and TV, alongside online sources including websites and social media platforms. The survey asks participants about their interest in news as well as their news consumption habits, including how frequently they access the news, which medium is their main news source, and which device they use to access online content. Participants are also asked more complex questions related to trust in news, the role of journalists, willingness to pay for news, misinformation, and data privacy. The results of these surveys offer invaluable contributions to our understanding of news consumption habits globally and provide a baseline for examining changes in news consumption habits across time at a high level, highlighting trends that can be further investigated by scholars. Nonetheless, these annual surveys are just that—a high-level overview of news consumption practices derived from a limited set of questions with predominantly pre-set answers a respondent can select from (Coughlan et al., 2009; Fowler, 2009; Fowler & Cosenza, 2009). The advantage of this approach, however, is the large response rate that allows generalisations to be made about various populations across the world although this comes at the expense of the breadth and depth of data that can be collected. For example, this survey does not inquire about the curation practices of social media users that may impact how much news is seen on the platforms that generate their personalised news feeds, nor does it ask why they might engage in these practices. While the

survey does ask participants which brands they use to access news on social media, whether they merely ‘come across’ news, and how much news they see on social media, it does not expressly ask participants whether they follow news accounts or if the content they encounter has been shared by friends, family, or other public figures. Nor does it ask what actions a user might take to either seek or avoid news content on these platforms, or their reasons for doing so, specifically as these relate to their use of social media platforms. In these respects, this study aims to provide a much richer, if smaller scale, account of news and information curation on social media.

The Digital News Report is also limited by how it defines news. Although the survey attempts to broaden its scope by providing its definition of news in question 1b_NEW⁵: “Typically, how often do you access _news_? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news *and other topical events* accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online).” (2022, pp. 2–3, emphasis added), questions 3 through 5 subsequently (and repeatedly) frame news as professionally produced content by including named news media brands, asking about journalists, and inquiring about subscriptions to news brands. As such, the survey guides participants to answer questions about their news consumption habits within a frame of traditional news content rather than exploring how *other topical events* might be presented and consumed on social media platforms. In doing so, news consumption on social media platforms is undifferentiated from news consumption through other channels, and professional news media content is reinforced as the only content worth contemplating as informative.

⁵ The survey questions are available from: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Survey%20Digital%20News%20Report%202022.pdf>

Without seeking out the additional types of contextual information noted above, researchers cannot have a complete picture of news consumption on these unique platforms in which the end user has more influence regarding what content appears on their social feeds than they could ever have for broadcast TV, radio, in print, or on news websites. Of course, the Digital News Reports cannot be all things to all people; rather these reports are—and should be—viewed as invaluable resources for driving further scholarly inquiry that also involves small scale, in depth qualitative studies. Accordingly, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by including non-professionally produced socially significant content in its data collection.

Data from various editions of the Digital News Reports have been examined by a range of scholars, as will be discussed throughout this chapter, and their studies provide valuable insight into news consumption practices in different contexts in addition to identifying emerging trends for further interrogation. One such example relevant to this thesis is a study from Nielsen and Schröder (2014) that examined the relative importance of social media as a news source in the eight countries included in the 2013 survey. It demonstrated the increased significance of social media when compared to previous Digital News Reports, and highlighted how news consumption on social media can vary in different cultural contexts.

The Pew Research Centre has also published frequently on news use on social media platforms in the US, providing additional time and place studies for this region (for examples, see Shearer & Grieco, 2019; Shearer & Matsa, 2018; Shearer & Mitchell, 2021; Walker & Matsa, 2021). One aim of this thesis is to contribute an Australian perspective on news consumption practices on social media, which may be of value to future researchers.

Since 2015, the Australian version of the Digital News Report has tracked a steady increase in the popularity of social media as one of many sources of news for some consumers, as well as the main source of news for younger news consumers (referred to here as Generation Z). In addition, the most recent global (Newman et al., 2022) and Australian (Park et al., 2022) editions of the Digital News Report draw particular attention to a sustained drop in interest in news over the last five years across all demographics, as well as a rise in news avoidance over the same period. In Australia, the tendency towards news avoidance increased from 8% in 2017 to 14% in 2022, and there was an overall increase in all levels of news avoidance of 11% in the same period, from 57% to 68% of survey respondents. The report provides useful insights into the reasons given for news avoidance: the effect of news on mood; declining trust in news media; and the feeling of overwhelm generated by the volume of news content. These reasons align with other studies into online news avoidance from Edgerly et al. (2018), Park (2019), and Goyanes et al. (2023).

It is important to note, however, that the news avoidance figures in both the global and Australian reports do not provide a comprehensive representation of news avoidance, as survey respondents must indicate that they have accessed news at least once in the last month to qualify for inclusion. It also does not distinguish between active avoidance of news and simply not seeking out news content, or as Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) describe, a "news-finds-me perception" where:

News avoidance suggests an active and conscious effort to avoid news content, whereas the news-finds-me perception fuels a failure to actively seek news. It is not that individuals who feel the news will find them are avoiding news, they just do not feel that they must go and find it. This is a subtle but important distinction. (p. 107)

As there is no better indicator of news avoidance than not accessing it at all, each potential respondent who was disqualified from inclusion might have provided more accurate statistics on news avoidance, and their reasons for news avoidance would have been illuminating. The aim of this thesis—that is, to enhance our understanding of social media users’ attitudes towards news media and other informative content—is therefore timely, and I have addressed this gap in the news avoidance literature by making sure that I did not include ‘interest in and use of news’ as a recruitment requirement. Through the inclusion of news avoidant participants in this research, my intention has been to capture their practices in news avoidance, as well as to directly observe whether their practices have an effect on the amount of news media content seen on their social feeds. In this thesis, participants self-reported and demonstrated through their practices that they were either seeking news on social media, held news-finds-me attitudes, or actively avoided the news, which is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) also made further use of Digital News Report data to explore incidental news exposure, finding that people who used social media but were not particularly interested in using it as a news source, experienced more exposure to news than the group that did not use social platforms and were only incidentally exposed to the news via mediums such as TV, radio, and print. This is an important finding that positions social media platforms as communication channels offering higher visibility of incidental news content within a high choice environment. It suggests that personalisation and non-scheduled media availability on these platforms may increase incidental exposure to news content, and that they have the capability to erode the traditional news avoidance mechanism. For example, incidental exposure to news on the TV or radio relies on these devices being switched on at the specific times that the news or a news update is being broadcast, meaning that a news avoidant person can avoid watching or listening at these times to ensure that they are not

incidentally exposed to the news. However, news on social media platforms can be made visible at any time on personalised news feeds and may be the result of personal connections either sharing or interacting with the news in some way rather than users seeking the news out themselves. These findings of Fletcher and Nielsen attest to the unique way in which news can be experienced on social media platforms, and the role of recommender algorithms in a user's news experiences. They also speak to the role of agency in users' decisions about what kind of content they prefer to include in their social media feeds: news seekers who follow news accounts versus news avoiders who are only incidentally exposed when using these platforms for other purposes.

Fletcher and Nielsen's (2018) study therefore goes some way towards addressing this thesis' second research question; however, their findings rely on users self-reporting incidental news exposure, which is often inaccurate (González-Bailón & Xenos, 2022). While Fletcher and Nielsen recognise this as a limitation to their study, they nonetheless argue that:

a survey is the only realistic option for addressing our hypotheses and research questions. Most passive tracking systems (e.g. comScore) are not able to record how people use social media, and data collected by social media platforms themselves are very rarely made available to outside researchers. (2018, p. 2456)

I disagree with this assertion, however, as there are a number of research methods available for direct observation of social media use that may be less convenient than a survey, but can provide more accurate data around news visibility, incidental news exposure, and news consumption. I discuss these methods at length in Chapter 4. It is also important to note that Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) only examined incidental news exposure in the context of professionally produced news content, which I have previously stated is a common theme in the existing literature. I address this limitation by specifically including in my study all forms

of social media content that might inform an individual about current events, including citizen journalism and cultural commentary.

Incidental news consumption on social media platforms has been examined by Boczkowski et al. (2018), who took meaningful steps to understand the agency that younger users may enact when deciding on what content to engage with in this context. These authors argue that with social media platforms accessible anywhere and anytime on mobile devices, the likelihood of incidental exposure to news content increases due to the combined algorithmic, editorial, and social filtering that takes place on these platforms. They propose that incidental news exposure on social platforms is a significant source of news content for younger users. These findings reaffirm those of Fletcher and Nielsen (2018), as noted above. Saliently, Boczkowski et al (2018) also emphasise the importance of user agency in determining what content is engaged with, regardless of what content users are actually exposed to. Moreover, they recognise the influence that non-professional content—such as discussions of topical events—can have on young people’s willingness to then seek out professional news content, which this thesis aims to explore further through an analysis of all forms of cultural commentary content. However, as with the Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) study, Boczkowski et al. (2018) also rely on users self-reporting their experiences, albeit in the latter’s case this is through more in-depth interviews rather than through a self-administered survey, a limitation this current study will address by providing rich ethnographic detail.

Ethnography provides a real-time engagement with user practices not found in other studies of news exposure on social media such as that reported in Kaiser et al. (2018). These authors used a novel experimental design to examine the influence of social ties and media outlet credibility on news selection and consumption practices. They argue that the credibility

of both the news publisher and the social tie that shared the content is a determining factor in converting incidental news exposure into engagement with news content. However, as the authors themselves note, their research is based on a simulation of news exposure on social media where they asked participants to imagine how they would react to news posts (that the researchers had invented) if these were shared by their social ties. In other words, the researchers did not observe actual behaviours. As mentioned previously, self-reporting of news behaviour habits tends to be flawed (González-Bailón & Xenos, 2022), with aspirational behaviours reported more frequently than measured. The authors also note that some factors cannot be isolated and accounted for in such a simulated experiment, most notably the role that recommender algorithms have to play with respect to what content participants might actually see. With this in mind, a more nuanced exploration of social media news consumption is warranted, in which practices are observed within the contexts they occur, and this desire for nuance and contextualisation has informed the methodological approach taken in this doctoral project.

Further, although the studies discussed above allude to an interest in how users discover news through informal discussion, they do not explore this process. As with other research into the news on social platforms, as discussed above, a narrow definition of professional news media content on social platforms dominates the frame of inquiry. This current study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by explicitly asking participants to take note of any content they see on social media that they believe is informative rather than merely priming them to only take note of professional news content. The aim is to contribute to our understanding of how users are incidentally exposed to topical issues when engaging in everyday social media use, and how this is mediated by their everyday filtering and curation practices.

In summary, this thesis will address three gaps in the literature on social media news consumption. Firstly, it adopts a broader understanding of what should be considered news on social platforms, for example, by acknowledging informal social banter and content that may also keep users up-to-date on significant issues in wider society. Secondly, it more clearly articulates how news consumption on social media fits into the overall social media experiences of the everyday user. Thirdly, this thesis examines news avoidance in this everyday use context, and specifically avoids requiring participants to express interest in news to be included in the study.

This thesis aims to address these gaps by examining everyday users' practices within a holistic context of social media use. It will focus on the practices that users engage in to shape their experiences with recommender algorithms on these platforms, their motivations for engaging in these practices, and how informative content becomes visible as a result of curation. In so doing, the thesis seeks to understand what everyday users consider to be news in the social media era.

In the next section, I present arguments for the inclusion of non-journalistic sources of news and information in this study of news consumption practices on social media platforms. To this end, I review scholarly works that also draw attention to this rich source of informative content.

2.4 What is news, anyway?

In the past decades, a large body of digital journalism research has noted the pluralisation or democratisation of who creates news (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019; Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019; Dwyer & Hutchinson, 2020; Eskens et al., 2017; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2019; Hurcombe et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2019; Linden, 2017; Martin, 2021;

Möller et al., 2018; Ofcom, 2022; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018; Waisbord, 2019), the changing economics of news media in a digital age (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019; Bolin, 2019; Franklin, 2014; Leaver, 2021; Martin & Dwyer, 2019; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Picard, 2014), the rise of misinformation and fake news (Lazer et al., 2018; Park et al., 2022; Rogers, 2020; Sterrett et al., 2019), and debates about what qualifies as news on social media (Choi, 2015; Feezell, 2018; Hermida, 2010, 2012; Soffer, 2021). This thesis aims to contribute to the last of these fields through an exploration of what news is to social media users. As such, it is prudent to clarify exactly what is meant by ‘news’ in this study, and why I am arguing for terminology that can encompass the many forms of content on social media that helps keep users informed about the world around them⁶.

A useful starting point for defining what is ‘news’ in the contemporary Western context, can be found in van Dijk’s *News as Discourse*, in which he provides a concise account of news as commonly understood across three dimensions:

1. New information about events, things or persons.
2. A (TV or radio) program type in which news items are presented.
3. A news item or news report, i.e., a text or discourse on radio, on TV or in the newspaper, in which new information is given about recent events. (1988, p. 4).

Each of van Dijk’s dimensions correlates to how news might be defined in a dictionary: firstly, as a concept capturing a type of information; secondly, as a specific format of broadcast programming; and thirdly, as a container of information—in other words, how this specific type of information (dimensions one and two) is presented for broadcast or within a

⁶ I am aware that the scholarly works and definitions of news discussed in this section are rooted in Western-centric traditions of news and journalism that have tended to dominate scholarly enquiry published in the English language (see Hallin & Mancini, 2011).

newspaper for an audience to then consume. As with van Dijk's book, most scholarly discussions of news on social media tend to focus on the third dimension of news—that is, as a discrete package of information about recent events prepared and shared by a news media organisation, be it 'legacy' with its roots in print, TV, or radio, or 'born digital' brands that emerged with the growth of the Internet as a medium of communication.

Van Dijk's definition of news is loose by design so as to account for the ambiguous and broad nature of news that he and many other scholars have identified. For example, Gittins contends that "news is anything the public finds interesting" (2015, p. 243) while Mencher states that "News is information people need to make sound decisions about their lives" (1997, p. 58). Elsewhere, Conley and Lambie (2006) have argued for news values that determine whether information is 'newsworthy' with respect to impact, conflict, timeliness, proximity, prominence, currency, and/or human interest. Further, news is also often considered in relation to the perceived value it presents for a democratic society, with public affairs content valued more highly than non-public affairs content. As Boczkowski and Mitchelstein observe:

journalists at generalist, mainstream news organizations consider stories about politics, economics, and international matters (hereafter characterized as public-affairs news) to be more newsworthy than articles about subjects such as crime, entertainment, sports, and the weather (hereafter characterized as non-public-affairs news). (2013, p. 6)

These authors, and other media and journalism scholars, frame news as being either professionally produced by journalists—that is, individuals with specialised training in the structures of news reporting, such as the 5 W's and 1 H, news values, and the inverted pyramid, and who abide by ethical codes of practice—or produced to the same structures and

standards by citizen journalists (see also Alysén et al., 2020; Conley & Lamble, 2006; Deuze et al., 2007; Karlsson et al., 2015; Shirky, 2008; Waisbord, 2019). However, as social media provides an instant publishing medium for any user who wants to share their thoughts, much of the content found on social media can provide the same information as professionally produced news without being structured as a news story or serving facts without opinion or bias.

As such, traditional definitions of news are no longer fit for purpose for studies of how social media users are exposed to socially significant information on these platforms. Shirky has discussed how the Internet and the digitisation of news production have been changing the definition of news, and commented on the emerging role of individuals in the flow of new information:

The change isn't a shift from one kind of news institution to another, but rather in the definition of news: from news as an institutional prerogative to *news as part of a communications ecosystem*, occupied by a mix of formal organizations, informal collectives, and *individuals*. (2008, pp. 65–66, emphasis added).

Here Shirky alludes to 'citizen journalism', the once popular concept that everyday citizens are able to contribute to news reporting through digital publishing tools such as blogs and social media that has seen varying levels of adoption and support in various global media markets (see Abbott, 2017; Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). Shirky recognises that non-professional news content is able to provide the same function as professionally produced news on social media platforms. This idea of individuals contributing news to the communication ecosystem, however, alludes to the notion of news being only one part of a wider ecosystem, where audiences are able to access other types of content that informs them of current events.

This chapter opened with a review of the role of news media in a functioning democracy and discussed how news addresses the provision of information needs for a citizenry. Schudson (2013) has extended the four key functions of the news media in a democracy, as presented earlier (see Christians et al., 2010; Curran, 2014; Curran & Seaton, 2003) to include its role as researcher and translator of complex ideas and concepts, its ability to give voice and representation to a citizenry that is affected by events and decisions beyond their control (including those from minority groups), and its ability to mobilise a citizenry into action. On social media platforms, each of these functions is supported by new types of news producers: expert commentators, citizen journalists, celebrities, political advocates, influencers, witnesses, and other everyday users who explain news issues, offer particular perspectives, and mobilise public discussion and engagement with news media. Bonilla and Rosa (2015), for instance, used the widespread protests that were triggered by the murder of Michael Brown at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, as an example of social media's role in racial politics. The events surrounding the Ferguson protests are an excellent example of how everyday users of social media are taking on the traditional functions of the media, with citizens sharing information about Brown's death, the protests, and the ongoing social issues that had surfaced the tensions. They also shared their own lived experiences with racial profiling by police, not only bringing context to the unfolding situation but also mobilising other social media users through calls to action. In doing so, these users a) provided information that was shared in an open forum, b) provided a contextual analysis of these experiences while trying to hold police power to account, c) framed these incidents within the human interest in personal stories, and d) mobilised others towards direct action, such as protesting and voting in local elections—all functions of the media, but enacted by everyday users. This type of first-person narrative and commentary on breaking news events is complemented by other everyday users also engaging in news sharing practices on social

media platforms (Martin & Dwyer, 2019), thereby contributing to the flow of information on these platforms.

Media researchers have noted the key roles of expert bloggers, citizen journalists, and influencers in changing the way news is produced (for examples, see Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Bruns, 2005, 2008; Choi, 2015; Deuze et al., 2007; Flamino et al., 2023; Hermida, 2010; Karlsson et al., 2015; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020; Wunderlich et al., 2022). These actors stimulate debate among their followers through their interpretation of the news and socially significant events. Following Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), I suggest this two-step flow of information, whereby the information disseminated by the mass media is translated through influential intermediaries or opinion leaders, deserves further attention.

From the early 2010s, media studies and journalism scholars started to investigate the political significance of informal news, news commenting, and personal communication streams on social media platforms, such as personal commentary, memes, and private discussions that contribute to a user's understanding of news and current events (Choi, 2015; Hermida et al., 2012; Karlsen, 2015; Soffer, 2021; Sterrett et al., 2019). Hermida (2010) recognised that the two-step flow of information that exists on social media platforms can move in all directions, creating ambient journalism environments. Ambient journalism refers to the way in which a journalist or social media user can contribute to the understanding of news and topical events through their own commentary on these platforms, resulting in circulating fragments of information that can alert other users to news and topical events. However, the idea of ambient journalism is still centred on the functions of journalism, with social media users acting in para-journalistic roles alongside professional reporters. An even broader term may be needed to capture how socially relevant information can flow on social media platforms through content that does not aim to contribute to journalism: content such

as memes, satire, personal discussions, and hot takes; content that is shared by celebrities, influencers, business accounts, public figures, as well as friends and family; and content that is highly opinionated or that passes judgement on events and topical issues.

These forms of news discussion or “secondhand news” (Palmer & Toff, 2022, p. 2) are an important phenomenon to study as everyday users may not recognise this type of content as news and may filter it differently to professional news. Take a news avoidant social media user, for instance: while they may avoid stories from news media accounts, how do they manage the occasional informative content coming from friends or family members, or from a celebrity or influencer that they follow? Following Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) conceptualisation of the two-step flow, it can be argued that political ideas and opinions are not shaped by traditional news alone, but that incidental exposure through secondhand news also contributes to how individuals understand socially significant information (Palmer & Toff, 2022).

In this thesis, I refer to these types of informative content collectively as cultural commentary. While this term frequently appears in academic works that discuss “news and cultural commentary” as two types of news media (see Rogers, 2020 for a clear example), it lacks definition⁷. In my usage, cultural commentary can, and frequently does, inform audiences of new information, even though this is presented alongside opinion rather than

⁷ At the time of writing, I have been unable to locate a definition of the term ‘cultural commentary’ in any academic dictionary, however, ‘cultural commentary’ appears frequently in a range of scholarly works where ‘cultural’ operates as an adjective descriptor of ‘commentary’ in the sense of a type of creative work (for examples, see Asadi, 2010; Ettorre, 2014; Strate, 2006).

just the ‘hard facts’⁸. Randall attempts to draw a line in the sand as to where news ends and commentary begins, arguing that news:

(...) may do lots of other things, like telling them what it thinks about the latest movies, how to plant potatoes, what kind of day Taureans might have or why the government should resign. But without fresh information it will be merely a commentary on things already known. Interesting, perhaps, stimulating even; but comment is not news. Information is. (2016, p. 31)

I disagree with Randall’s assertion that commentary is based on information “that is already known” and therefore inferior to the fresh factual news reporting, especially in regard to news on social media platforms.

That ‘cultural commentary’ as a category of news content lacks formal definition is surprising due to the frequency with which the term appears in journalistic works, which suggests that it is commonly understood, even self-explanatory. Online versions of *The New Yorker*⁹, *Rolling Stone*¹⁰, and the *Wall Street Journal*¹¹ offer cultural commentary as a subsection of stories on their websites. Despite this, neither the Oxford English Dictionary nor the Merriam Webster dictionary include a definition of the term, and searching for the phrase on the crowd-edited resource Wikipedia, at least at the time of writing, redirects the browser to a page on “cultural critic” (“Cultural critic,” 2023, January 7) with no mention of cultural commentary itself. However, the term cultural criticism offers a useful starting point

⁸ To note that my use of the term ‘cultural commentary’ does not refer to journalistic use of the similar term of the similar term of ‘opinion editorials’, or ‘op-eds’ that “provide experts, the public and policy makers a space to present and argue different sides of the public agenda” (Day & Golan, 2005, p. 62)

⁹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment>

¹⁰ <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-commentary/>

¹¹ <https://www.wsj.com/news/types/cultural-commentary>

for establishing a definition of cultural commentary. Berger provides this useful description of what it may include:

Cultural criticism can involve literary and aesthetic theory and criticism, philosophical thought, media analysis, popular cultural criticism, interpretive theories and disciplines (semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, sociological and anthropological theory, and so on), communication studies, mass media research, and various other means of making sense of contemporary (and not so contemporary) culture and society. (1995, pp. 2–3)

This description of cultural criticism alludes to cultural commentary as a type of media text that provides “other means of making sense of contemporary (...) culture and society”. While this suggests that cultural commentary is the output of the cultural critic, Berger’s identification of cultural critics remains centred on theorists, philosophers, and other academics rather than journalists and media producers. An alternative approach to defining the cultural commentary associated with news might draw more heavily on the social aspect referenced in Berger’s description of cultural criticism and turning to ‘social criticism’ for further analysis. Walzer provides a definition of the term ‘social criticism’ that sits closer to the types of texts produced alongside news which comment and reflect on current events:

Social criticism is such a common activity—so many people, in one way or another, participate in it—that we must suspect from the beginning that it doesn’t wait upon philosophical discovery or invention. (...) Social criticism is a social activity.

“Social” has a pronominal and reflexive function, rather like “self” in “self-criticism,” which names subject and object at the same time. No doubt, societies do not criticize themselves; social critics are individuals, but they are also, most of the time, members, speaking in public to other members who join in the speaking and whose

speech constitutes a collective reflection upon the conditions of collective life. (1987, p. 30)

Walzer's definition of "social criticism as a social practice" (1987, p. 3) speaks to the ubiquity of the term 'cultural commentary' being collocated with 'news' in popular media (for scholarly examples that refer to 'cultural commentary' in a way that meets Walzer's definition of 'social criticism', see Harrington, 2012; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Jack, 2017; Maddox & Creech, 2021; Rogers, 2020).

According to this definition, informative content produced by news media that does not conform to the objective reporting of facts would fall under the umbrella of cultural commentary: opinion pieces, entertainment and lifestyle reviews, and cartoons. This type of content provides interpretations not just of the news, but of society, culture, and the emerging issues that impact both. Importantly, many who participate in professional cultural commentary also do so on social media—journalists, politicians, academics, activists, and other experts have established a social media presence where they can connect directly with audiences in a less formal capacity (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2016; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Lee, 2020; McGregor, 2019; Molyneux et al., 2019). However, social media platforms also allow quite literally anyone with an account and access to function in these roles, providing commentary and opinions on what is happening in the world, regardless of the size of their audience, and without the expectations of ethical practice that bind many media professionals and other public figures. This means that both the reporting of breaking news and the provision of opinions and interpretations of these events no longer falls solely within the domain of professional journalists working for legacy news media organisations. For example, Bruns (2008), Shirky (2008), Jenkins (2006), Fuchs (2014b) are among those

scholars who have commented on new media's capacity to let audiences participate in cultural production, where "everyone is a media outlet" (Shirky, 2008, p. 55).

In an environment of 'produsage' where "ordinary experts" (Lewis, 2010) without formal training or experience in media industries can take advantage of social media platform affordances to share their knowledge and opinions with a global audience, anyone can become a cultural intermediary or digital influencer (Hutchinson, 2017). Scholars have already begun examining how traditional social media influencers are emerging as political influencers through their commentary of news, politics, and social issues (for examples, see Soares et al., 2018; Suuronen et al., 2021). Additionally, scholars such as Palmer and Toff (2022), Penney (2018), and Wunderlich et al. (2022) argue that even everyday users of social media may act as opinion leaders within their social networks, acting as intermediary sources of news and political commentary.

Dutton (2009) positions social media users discussing news and providing political commentary as contributing to the 'fifth estate', where these and other Internet users highlight socially significant issues to their audiences of network connections to hold power to account, much as the mass media has done over the last two centuries in their role of the fourth estate. He argues that the internetworking capabilities that platforms (such as social media platforms) and apps afford not only allow users to connect and communicate effectively, but also to bring about real-world change. That is, users can share news and cultural commentary to hold powerful institutions—such as governments, multinational enterprises and the media itself—to account.

Cultural commentary is a useful term for addressing the pluralisation of news on social media as it speaks to the new critical role of the audience and non-journalists in the news ecosystem. It also acknowledges the individual user's agency in these digital public

spheres, where they are able to contribute to public debate by sharing their interpretations and evaluations of topical issues and events. Cultural commentary also references the blurring not only of opinion and factual genres in digital news production, but the roles between different types of reporters, commentators, critics, and non-journalists. Importantly, this thesis will investigate whether cultural commentary content from non-journalistic sources is consumed even by those who avoid traditional news, thereby providing an avenue for topical issues and breaking news to reach these users in a different context.

For the above reasons, cultural commentary is worth studying as a form of informal news and information production since the blurring of opinion, commentary, and factual news reporting changes how information flows on these platforms, and this presents a challenge for traditional news producers trying to attract future news consumers to their brands. While cultural commentary exists alongside professional news content on social media—forming an important part of the news communication ecosystem of social media platforms—it is often neglected, especially in discussions of incidental news exposure (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2018; Park & Kaye, 2020) (It must be noted, however, that Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage (2018), Feezell (2018), and Palmer and Toff (2022) are exceptions as these scholars do include the two-step flow as part of their studies of incidental news exposure.) An examination of how cultural commentary content is perceived, sought or avoided, and ultimately curated by users can also contribute to our understanding of how social media users experience these platforms as digital public spheres or sphericules in which they can engage in political debate and contribute to the formation of public opinion. Including cultural commentary content in the news communication ecosystem allows us to examine how it is perceived by everyday users of social media within their everyday social media use: for example, is it recognised as a form of news, and how do users respond to its presence in their personalised social feeds?

The next section explores scholarship that focuses on news media on algorithmically mediated social media platforms, where traditional news media has less authority and visibility than it has previously enjoyed within legacy mass media systems such as print, radio, and TV.

2.5 Algorithmic recommendation on social media platforms

Much of the media and journalism literature that investigates how social media platforms affect news and information consumption focuses on algorithmic mediation of traditional news stories (Carlson, 2018; Helberger, 2019; Möller et al., 2018), rather than related types of information such as cultural commentary. This literature also centres on the recommender algorithms that personalise individual social media feeds, rather than the users who experience them and their role in driving these processes (see also Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Cornia et al., 2018; Diakopoulos, 2015; Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017; Just & Latzer, 2017; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). Studying users' attempts to influence algorithmic recommendations is critical as it reveals the inability of this system to assemble a complete picture of user interest. It also reveals why users are motivated to better curate their feeds and what is of value to them on social media platforms.

The first step in analysing these processes is defining what recommender algorithms are, and how they are employed on social media platforms. However, recommender algorithm systems are not transparent to end users. Pasquale (2015) draws attention to the opacity and dominance of these algorithmic systems in our mediated online lives, as well as how aware (or unaware) users may be of this processing. Central to his arguments are the unknowableness of algorithms, both through intellectual property laws protecting the release of code for examination, as well as the sheer complexity of the code in place; hence the

labelling of algorithms as ‘black boxes’. This thesis takes seriously the observation that algorithmic processes can only become known to everyday users through their experiences of them, which in turn shapes their behaviours when interacting with algorithms online (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Willson, 2017). For this reason, I will explore how social media users experience recommender algorithms as well as their reactions to them.

Bucher’s (2012) seminal work on algorithmic power and content visibility on Facebook highlights how recommender systems have become established as a new controlling force in the distribution of media content, including the news. She makes a convincing argument that power is held by social media platforms through their deployment of algorithms to recommend content to users, rather than users being presented with a chronological list of new content from the accounts the user follows. Bucher makes this argument by first linking algorithmic visibility to Foucault’s theory of visibility (Foucault, 1977, as cited in Bucher, 2012), and then outlining how his concept of the panopticon can be seen in the algorithms at play on social media platforms. Platforms derive power from the surveillance nature of mined data from user interactions, as well as the algorithm’s ability to decide not just what content can or cannot be seen on social media platforms but also who can or cannot see it. This establishes algorithms as virtual panopticons that create the rules for “how visibility is constructed” (Bucher, 2012, p. 1165), with these rules influencing a range of social practices around visibility on these platforms. This highlights a “circular logic” (Bucher, 2017, p. 1169) of visibility where only content that is liked or commented on is promoted as popular on Facebook. Yet, for users to be able to like or comment on a post they first have to see the post on their feed and it needs to be deemed popular enough to be promoted to a wider audience. This circular promotional logic drives many of the productive curation practices discussed later in this chapter, where users attempt to construct content that is appealing to both the algorithm and their own audience as the first step in attracting swift

and strong engagement, and hence visibility on the platform. However, as Bucher rightly calls out, unlike the panopticon, algorithms on these platforms do not treat each user equally, so once again the power lies with the algorithm. That users are now recognising that high engagement and activity on Facebook are rewarded with higher visibility also points to how algorithmic awareness is developed, as discussed later in this chapter.

While a number of media studies scholars have examined how algorithmic recommender systems sell news to audiences (Bodó et al., 2019), promote audience voice (Harambam et al., 2018; Helberger, 2019), affect media diversity (Helberger et al., 2018; Möller et al., 2018), and affect the audience's right to information (Eskens et al., 2017), these scholars focus on news website personalisation rather than on social media systems. The literature examining news on social media platforms concentrates on how recommender processes affect news visibility through collaborative filtering and platform priorities (Anspach, 2017; Cornia et al., 2018; Johannesson & Knudsen, 2021; Kuchta et al., 2019; Lamot, 2022; Martin, 2019; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). In contrast, the current study is less concerned with professional news than cultural commentary. It is also less focused on the possibility of altering recommender systems, and more interested in understanding user influence over them.

This different focus is important because it refocuses on the user and their agency in recommender systems rather than on the recommender systems themselves. One popular scholarly debate that is centred on recommender systems rather than user agency is whether 'echo chambers' (Sunstein, 2001) or 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011b) exist, where content is served in a personalised, curated, and taste-reinforcing manner, in contrast to content that is presented in a chronological order or complete list. Political scientist Cass Sunstein (2001, 2018) famously claimed that personalisation of content based on user data and preferences

would create closed networks of users who would only see content that reinforced a particular confirmation bias, therefore creating an echo chamber of similar perspectives and opinions when users search for information. Similarly, Pariser (2011b) also raised the alarm over narrow information diets driven by the filtering nature of personalisation through algorithmic recommender systems that would simply not show the user content that does not match the profile that a platform has created for them. Both Sunstein (2018) and Pariser (2011b) warn that the polarisation these echo chambers and filter bubbles create are further amplified in the age of social media profiles and asymmetrical relationship building on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Central to the arguments of these two scholars is the proposition that individual users—through engagement with content that appeals to their values, beliefs, and interests—will teach algorithmic recommender systems to prioritise content that best aligns to their preferences or comes from other users with similar values and opinions. This recommendation profile develops at the expense of other content that may challenge a user’s point of view or values, or that is simply not of enough interest to them. Similarly, Just and Latzer (2017) argue that the widespread use of algorithmic recommendation systems online has had a negative effect on society as a whole, with the shared reality that was once created by the mass media being replaced by individual, personalised realities created by online platforms. Andrejevic (2019) echoes many of Just and Latzer’s points, arguing that the growing reliance on algorithmic filtering is problematic beyond concerns that it reinforces confirmation biases and disrupts concepts of shared realities. He suggests that personalisation may also be eroding any ‘civic disposition’ that an audience may have in favour of more individualistic ideals.

Andrejevic (2019), however, also argues that an increase in personalisation can lead to increased content diversity, that is, the ‘long tail’ of interests is amplified by algorithmic processing, although this would not necessarily lead to more open-minded thinking. Other

scholars have also challenged the prevalence or even existence of filter bubbles on social media (see Bodó et al., 2019; Bruns, 2019; Dutton et al., 2017; Helberger, 2019; Möller et al., 2018), suggesting that end users are exposed to more content diversity online than is suggested by this theory. This thesis takes Bruns's (2019) position that arguments about filter bubbles and echo chambers repeat the moral panics that came with the introduction of other media technologies before social media, such as the printing press, radio and television. These moral panics stem from a focus on the technology and its capabilities rather than on the agency of the users who engage with it, failing to address the motivations of end users in pursuing content that appeals to their interests and values. While this thesis does not directly investigate the existence or impact of potential filter bubbles or echo chambers, my work intends to contribute to this emerging debate through the study of the content that social media users are exposed to after personalisation, and how these users then respond to this content through their curation practices.

As with the literature previously discussed in this chapter, the studies just described narrowly define news as professionally produced content. They also frame algorithms as central to news media's visibility on social media platforms, affecting what news media content end users can consume on these platforms and playing a critical role in gatekeeping information in these contexts. This positions algorithms as technologically determinist—machines operating beyond the sway of human agency—a position that this thesis specifically aims to challenge.

With the exception of Andrejevic (2019), these studies do not challenge the robustness of the data points available for interpretation either. Yet, the motivation for a user to click on a link or search for a topic is beyond the capabilities of current sensor

technologies to divine. Additionally, passive social media use, where the user does not interact with interface affordances—other than to scroll through the feed (Burke et al., 2010; McGrath, 2015)—does not create data points, which renders interpretation of their behaviour from data points alone a flawed process.

Platform algorithms constitute just one side of the recommender process, with end users occupying the other critical—yet often rarely studied—side. It is important to emphasise here that social media platforms are, more frequently than not, used for purposes other than accessing news media; yet, each time a user engages with social media platforms they create data points for information personalisation, affecting what content they see. The findings presented in this thesis will demonstrate that users are increasingly aware of the actions of personalisation algorithms, and that those who are dissatisfied with default interpretations of their interests are curating their social feeds in response.

In the next section, I provide an overview of literature that examines how social media users understand algorithms, how they enact agency through curation, and the impact this has on their social media practices.

2.6 Framing user agency on social media

Critical to this research project is an understanding of the various ways in which users interact with, behave on, and negotiate social media platforms as a normative practice in their ordinary and everyday use.

While there has been much research into the ways in which algorithmic mediation affects user experiences and behaviours (Andrejevic, 2019; Boczkowski et al., 2018; boyd, 2014; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Bucher, 2012, 2017; Colbjørnsen, 2018; Cotter, 2019; Just

& Latzer, 2017; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019; Napoli & Caplan, 2017; Seaver, 2018), far less has addressed the nature of user agency and user strategies to filter news and information.

Willson (2017) provides perhaps the most useful study on the ubiquity of algorithmic processes and users' awareness of them, suggesting that algorithms often operate without alerting end users to their presence or function. By highlighting this relative invisibility, Willson demonstrates how users' practices around algorithms develop over time, often unconsciously, through the consistent use of apps and platforms that are embedded in their daily activities and processes. The tactics and practices that users develop to enact agency over these processes—for instance, in cases where the default processing outcomes do not match their expectations or desires—can create a tension between user and algorithm that “lends shape to everyday life” (Willson, 2017, p. 140). This is an astute observation of how users curate their online activity whereby, rather than passively accepting algorithmic recommendations as a *fait accompli*, they find ways to resist or negotiate these processes. With respect to their experiences with social media platforms, everyday users can and do engage with platform affordances experimentally in their day-to-day interactions in an attempt to negotiate with these algorithms, curating their experiences in what may in time become routine behaviour (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Willson, 2017). It is through the repetition of these mundane, everyday, and unconscious interactions with algorithms that “practices become normalised or naturalised, usually enacted with minimal thought and often rendered invisible or in the background (or at the very least as largely unquestioned).” (Willson, 2017, p. 138). Willson's description serves as the basis the definition of ‘normative behaviours’ I will use throughout this thesis. By studying these normative curation behaviours and why they develop, this thesis connects user practices to their beliefs of how social media algorithms work.

Building on Willson's work, Cotter and Reisdorf (2020) connected experience with algorithms to practices, exploring how user awareness of algorithmic processing correlates with socio-economic advantage. The authors conclude that algorithms can be seen as experience technologies, where "use of an algorithmic platform permits users to learn how a specific algorithm works" (2020, p. 747). They argue that both frequency and breadth of use can impact an individual user's experiences of algorithms by increasing the user's awareness of their existence and developing the user's literacy regarding their use. In other words, this development of algorithmic awareness can influence how a user approaches and behaves on platforms where algorithmic processes are present. While their study is limited to search platforms, Cotter and Reisdorf encourage further inquiry into more complex algorithmically mediated environments such as social media platforms, which is one aim of this thesis.

Cotter and Reisdorf's (2020) conceptualisation of algorithms as experience technologies also builds on the concept of the algorithmic imaginary developed by Bucher, that is, "the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible" (2017, p. 31). Bucher argues that the algorithmic imaginary acts as a reinforcing feedback loop of input and output that engenders a user's sense of familiarity with or expectation of how the algorithm will behave, which in turn affects how users might behave on these platforms. This loop generates normative behaviours towards the algorithm, which then affect how the algorithm filters and prioritises content visibility further. Critically, the algorithmic imaginary frames algorithms as known entities: something that users are not only aware of but are consciously engaging and negotiating with. While algorithms themselves might remain black boxes (Pasquale, 2015), it is argued that the algorithmic imaginary is the culmination of input actions and expected outcomes, and that these come to the front of users' minds when the outcomes do not match expectations. This conceptualisation suggests that most users have at least some awareness of the algorithm's

role in their experiences on social platforms, and that they believe their conscious actions can maximise their influence over the system and how it behaves in future encounters. Bucher's work falls just short, however, of identifying exactly what these maximising behaviours are, or how each person might attempt to enact agency within the platform. She also does not explore how widespread or uniform these behaviours might be across everyday users of social media platforms, or how effective they actually are at influencing the content that is either promoted to or hidden from them. Without this analysis, the existence of normative behaviours in response to algorithms is assumed rather than supported with evidence.

Research on algorithmic awareness and the algorithmic imaginary was extended by Colbjørnsen (2018) in his exploration of the ways in which a user's awareness of algorithms can lead to personification of the algorithm itself, resulting in new normative behaviours derived from negotiations with it. Colbjørnsen draws on Human-Machine Communication as a framework for his discussion, positioning the algorithm as a non-human entity to be negotiated with. He echoes Bucher's (2017) and Cotter and Reisdorf's (2020) observations that algorithms are understood through the outputs experienced although Colbjørnsen also argues that the back and forth of action and reaction can be viewed as a meaningful communicative exchange, leading some users to start talking about the algorithms in a personified manner, attaching human capabilities and traits such as 'thought' and 'remembering' which suggests intimate knowledge of users' individual preferences and desires. Personification of the algorithm can therefore act as an indicator of a user's familiarity with algorithmic processes, as well as how the user imagines the logics that recommender processes follow.

These works on algorithmic awareness, algorithmic imaginaries, and algorithmic personification have contributed to the development of the plan of inquiry and analysis in this

thesis, including the choice of semi-structured interviews, the media go-alongs, and the use of screenshots as media diary, as discussed in detail in Chapter 4. These methods were useful as they invited participants to reflect on why they enacted specific curation practices (Koenig, 2020), and drew comments that established their understanding or speculations regarding what recommender algorithms were doing and why, as well as contributing to further development of their own algorithmic awareness (discussed at length in Chapter 7). Participants' personification of the algorithm also provided a means through which I was able to establish algorithmic awareness (described further in Chapter 4).

A number of scholars who have explored the behaviours of social media users as they try to enact agency on social media platforms to create their own curated experiences (Holton et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016; Thurman et al., 2019). Merten (2021) and Swart (2021) have investigated personal curation of news content on social media platforms in response to algorithmic awareness of recommender systems, providing much needed scholarly work that centres on the user in these processes. Merten (2021) used data collected for the 2017 edition of the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2017) to investigate the prevalence of both news-limiting and news-boosting curation practices on social media platforms. Swart (2021) examined the algorithmic literacy of young Dutch social media users, concluding that development of algorithmic awareness is not necessarily accompanied by the accepted lexicon to describe what algorithms are and what they do. These studies clearly align with the goals of this thesis as they both emphasise curation practices as a response to algorithmic awareness and are centred on news content. However, they both rely on a narrow definition of news for the purposes of their data collection and fail to establish the effectiveness of curation practices with respect to content outcomes. This thesis aims to address these limitations through an in-depth digital ethnography that includes

a direct examination of news and cultural commentary content served to users, a catalogue of curation practices, and an evaluation of their effectiveness.

Cotter has studied the interdependent relationships between platforms, algorithms, and users in recommender systems, testing social media visibility against user agency and action. She argues that while productive consumption practices on Instagram are constrained, they are not dictated by the platform algorithm, and that content creators' responses to the recommender algorithm should be viewed as "playing the visibility game" (2019, p. 896). Her examination of social media influencers' curation practices, and how these have developed through experiences shared within a community of other influencers, highlights how algorithmic awareness can also include awareness of platform priorities that shape recommender logics. It also indicates that end users must understand what these logics are and how to use them to their advantage to succeed on these platforms.

However, success can be difficult to achieve when negotiating with an algorithm that is both opaque in its operation and prone to frequent changes and tweaks. As such, just like the algorithm, curation practices on social media platforms must be continuously amended to stay in the game. Cotter's (2019) study highlights the need for conscious responses to algorithms that are in constant flux although it must also be noted that the subjects of her study were influencers and content creators. These users are economically motivated to develop algorithmic literacy and they have access to advanced analytics on social media platforms that the everyday user does not. As these insights are of high value to other social media content creators such as news media, this thesis uses Cotter's work as a starting point for exploring how and why everyday users consumptively rather than productively curate their social media feeds.

In discussing ‘consumptive’ curation, I am drawing on Davis’s (2017) curation framework. Davis uses the term to distinguish curation practices that are designed to facilitate individual consumption from curation practices that are ‘productive’, that is, how users curate the content that they share on social media posts so as to align with the identity they want to project and the type of content that is more likely to be visible on these platforms. The term consumptive curation has been taken up in studies by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism on proactive personalisation (Lee et al., 2019) and the psychological mechanisms of news feed curation (Lu, 2020). As noted in the next chapter, Davis’s work has informed the theoretical framing of my study.

News on social media platforms is just one form of content among many that is affected by recommender algorithm systems, which decide what content to make visible to different users. Re-centring the user in social media news consumption studies (rather than focusing on the algorithm) allows us to start to understand the role that news plays in each user’s social feed, where content is either sought out or actively avoided.

More needs to be learnt about everyday users’ normative consumption and curation practices so as to understand their beliefs about how algorithms work, and how these algorithms can be made to work for them. Investigating users’ relative interest in, and consumption of, news and cultural commentary will contribute to our understanding of how and why users curate their social feeds. We also need more understanding of the collaborative aspects of user practices and how users’ network interactions affect relevance and engagement in recommender systems. This will allow us to more effectively track how these practices might influence news popularity, visibility, and production.

In this study, I focus on young people’s algorithmic awareness and curation practices as Generation Z (born after 1997) in Australia represents the highest proportion of news

consumers using social media as their primary source of news (Park et al., 2022). Generation Z also tend to have less interest in news media than older generations even though they are still interested in understanding current events (Costera Meijer, 2007; Newman et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022). Generation Z's use of social media as their preferred source of news over traditional print, radio, and TV is of increasing interest to scholars and news producers, as attracting new generations of loyal news audiences is vital for the future economic viability of commercial news production (Collao, 2022; Galan et al., 2019).

2.7 Youth and social media platforms

Everyday youth media consumption on social media requires more systemic research (Buckingham & Kehily, 2014). While a user's interest in news and informative content will change over time, their normative practices are formed and shaped starting from their first experiences with these platforms. Accordingly, I am interested in exploring how social and parasocial connections shape how these young adult users come to understand and interpret important events and topical issues. To contribute to an understanding of these emerging news users, I have limited the data collection for this thesis to social media users born after 1991, which covers the Generation Z demographic but also includes Generation Y users aged 30 years and under, as these users are the most likely to consume news on social media platforms (Park et al., 2022).

Many users still use social media platforms primarily as a social tool for connecting with friends and family although they are increasingly being used for other specific purposes such as entertainment, career building, community building, staying informed, and learning about the world both locally and globally (Fu & Cook, 2021). Teens, in particular, are now growing up with social media as a ubiquitous part of their normative media practices and are

therefore an excellent target audience for research studies exploring the foundations of normative behaviours that are seen in adulthood on these platforms.

boyd (2014) explored both the motivations and the ways in which teenagers in the US engage with various social platforms to participate in the imagined publics and communities found in these networked spaces. Her ethnographic study suggests that younger users, specifically pre-adult teenage users, use different platforms for different purposes (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Fu & Cook, 2021). She found that these social platforms act as a means of accessing publics that may be entirely or partially closed off to them in the offline world due to the demands and constraints placed on them by their parents, school-work, and other commitments. She suggests that these online networked publics act as a place to be and to be seen and a place to develop community—they also present an opportunity for teens to create online identities and to learn “how public life works” (boyd, 2014, p. 19), and they do this through the media narratives they engage with on these platforms. boyd stops short of describing social media platforms as digital public spheres while nonetheless alluding to their utility as such. In this way, she highlights the critical role of not only friends and family, but also public figures, influencers, and media organisations in shaping teens’ perceptions of the societies to which they belong—what is shared and discussed on their social feeds forms part of this educational experience: “where information flows through networks and where people curate information for their peers, *who you know shapes what you know*” (boyd, 2014, p. 172; emphasis added). boyd’s study demonstrates how young people’s social media use establishes practices that they take with them as they mature, which includes the use of these platforms as a tool for understanding the world. boyd’s observation that users’ early social media practices become normative has directly contributed to my desire to focus on younger users of social media within the context of news consumption.

Building on previous works exploring youth and social media experiences (Lincoln, 2012; Robards, 2012), Robards and Lincoln (2020) studied a more mature group of young social media users, conducting research with a cohort of 41 Australian young adults (aged in their twenties) who had been using social media for at least the last five consecutive years prior to the study. They argue that young adults today are the first to have grown up documenting their identities on social platforms, especially Facebook, and therefore this group has a different relationship with social media platforms than older generations of users that is worthy of scholarly exploration. Robards and Lincoln's study focuses on the productive aspects of social media curation practices that leave lingering traces of identity, and they argued that young adults' use of social media is studied and purposeful, with constant decisions being made about what content to share. The ideas presented in this thesis align with Robards and Lincoln's work, especially in our agreement that social media use is purposeful. However, my research differs from theirs in that mine specifically examines the consumptive rather than productive curation practices of everyday users in the same age group, with everyday users arguably spending more time consuming than producing content.

While both of the studies described above have influenced this research project, neither discusses how these younger users perceive, and negotiate with, the recommender algorithms, or how this shapes their future media consumption practices. This is critical for understanding how younger users begin to participate in and benefit from the digital public sphere offered by social media platform use, and how they negotiate news and informative content on platforms used primarily for more social or entertainment purposes. While the above is but a very small reflection of the literature available on youth and social media use, my aim has been to provide some insight into the differing habits of younger users of social media platforms, as they are the target demographic for my research project.

2.8 Conclusion

As has been argued throughout this chapter, platforms exercise enormous power over what users see on social media platforms, and news and cultural commentary content on these platforms can be promoted or hidden by algorithmic recommender processes. However, everyday users who are aware of algorithmic processing can nonetheless enact some degree of agency in curating their experiences on social media platforms, especially where default personalisation does not meet their information needs. As social media platforms have the ability to create digital public spherecules for information sharing and debate that facilitate democratic processes, more research is needed to understand the complex media environment that everyday users are exposed to. Specifically, it is important to consider (and expand) what constitutes as news content, to gather qualitative data on how news content on social media is engaged with, and to explore how users' own curation practices can influence what they are exposed to. In order to increase their appeal to emerging news audiences, news producers will need to respond to differences in how news is consumed on social platforms, and how users prioritise news and informative content in their feeds through their consumptive curation practices. The next chapter presents a theoretical framework that encompasses both algorithms as experience technologies and everyday users' curation practices and which will attend to the gaps identified in the literature just described.

Chapter 3: Frameworks for experiencing algorithms

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline the theories of media and communications practice that will be used in this study to analyse how users engage and negotiate with recommender algorithms on social media platforms in their pursuit of news and information. Social media platforms allow users to navigate and interact with content through the available platform affordances, such as buttons and menus. Norman defines affordances as “a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (2013, p. 11). Affordances are the means by which users curate their social media accounts and feeds, and this curation creates data points for the recommender algorithms to interpret for the purpose of personalisation. I take the position presented by Cotter and Reisdorf (2020) that algorithms are experience technologies, in the sense that users learn about algorithms and what they process through repeated interactions and the practice of curation. For this reason, practice theory is well suited to my exploration of how users’ algorithmic literacy shapes their curation activities on social media platforms.

In this chapter, I argue that applying practice theory to the exploration of news consumption on social media platforms ensures a holistic approach to understanding not only those behaviours in which users engage, but also why they are motivated to engage in them, and why their behaviours change over time. I argue that the practices social media users engage in result from their experiences with the algorithmic recommender systems on these platforms and a desire to curate their social feed; moreover, these practices are constrained by the limited range of platform affordances available to them. Therefore, frameworks for examining algorithmic literacy, platform affordances, and curation practices are needed to

explore the relationships between these aspects. As such, in this chapter, I present practice theory as the primary theoretical lens that informs this thesis's inquiry and analysis, and this is supported by theoretical treatments of algorithmic literacy, affordances, and social media curation.

The chapter begins with an overview of practice theory in the context of media studies before moving on to explore how practice theory frames the development of the research methodology of algorithms as an experience technology. It then introduces the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness (AMCA) scale as a framework for understanding algorithmic literacy in relation to content seen on social media platforms. Theories of affordances are presented as a complimentary theoretical lens that can be applied to understanding everyday users' normative behaviours on social media platforms. The chapter concludes with the theoretical treatment of curation (Davis, 2017) as a framework for normative practices employed by everyday users on social media platforms to shape the content that they see on their social feeds. This framework is integral to answering this thesis' primary research question: "How and why do users curate access to news on social media platforms through their consumption practices?"

3.2 Practice theory

Practice theory lends itself to the analysis of how people experience their use of technology. As Ortner observes:

modern practice theory seeks to explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call "the system," on the other. Questions concerning these relationships may go in either direction—the

impact of the system on practice, and the impact of practice on the system. (1984, p. 148).

In the context of this thesis, ‘the system’ is social media communication: a sociotechnical assembly of users, their interactions, and the platforms they interact through (Obar & Wildman, 2015). This section outlines practice theory as it applies to both media and how algorithms are experienced on social media platforms, and it explains how practice theory has guided the data collection in this thesis. By focussing on the role of the user within these sociotechnical systems, as well as the effect that user practices have on algorithmic responses to this input, attention can be drawn to the way in which curation practices have evolved on these platforms and how end users expect algorithms to process content on their social feeds.

As many scholars have attested, there is no single, unifying theory of practice (Nicolini, 2012; Postill, 2010; Schatzki, 2001). Instead, as Nicolini argues, an array of approaches and theories with a shared history and significant conceptual similarities have collectively been referred to as the “practice turn” (2012). For instance, key works by Bourdieu, on habitus (1984), Giddens, on structuration (1984), as well as Ortner (1984), Schatzki (1996; 2001), and Couldry (2004) on practice theory have informed the approaches taken by scholars interested in people’s interactions with everyday objects online (for examples, see Boczkowski et al., 2018; Pink et al., 2016; Willson, 2017).

The various approaches to practice theory have their roots in the works of Marx, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Nicolini (2012) contends that what they have in common can be grouped into five overarching concepts:

1. productive and reproductive work is both shaped by the contexts in which they occur and also re-shapes these into new contexts and new practices;
2. a focus on the role of the individual and agency within situated practices;

3. the inextricable presence that power, conflict and interests have in all that we do;
4. practices are formed around bodily actions and material objects; and
5. That the study of practices brings new insights into the nature of discourse as it relates to knowledge. (adapted from Nicolini, 2012, pp. 3–5)

The first three points are of the most relevance to this thesis. I argue that the lens of practice theory is well suited for examining the practices of everyday users of social media as users are both producing and reproducing actions that become normative. While social media platforms exert power over users, they also grant power to users as they adhere to each platform's notion of ideal usage; indeed, users may in fact wield more agency when engaging with these platforms than they are frequently given credit for.

Couldry explores practice theory specifically in the context of media, asking “what types of things do people do in relation to media?” (2004, p 121). He suggests that the open nature of practice research is of benefit to audience studies in that it leaves space for actions to be analysed as they arise in different contexts or different groups. This is in contrast to researchers attempting to define one set of practices as universal. Within the context of social media activity, everyday users are limited by what they can do within the confines of the platform they are using although platform affordances are also frequently refined and expanded based on user activity. Take for example the introduction of hashtags on Twitter. Early users of this micro-blogging social media site were confined to the practice of sharing tweets of no longer than 140 characters. While users developed their messaging practices within this constrained platform affordance, many became frustrated with the inability to easily follow conversations on a particular topic across un-connected users. One such user, Chris Messina, proposed the introduction of hashtags, in a series of blog posts in mid 2007, as a solution to this problem, intending them to be used as a means of indexing content on the

platform (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Hashtags, therefore, are an example of communicative practices forming within a usage context, as well as practices influencing the context within which they are enacted. Twitter eventually added hashtag functionality to its platform architecture as a clickable hyperlink.

The hashtag is also an example of users enacting agency to influence how a platform works *for* them. Using this example, I argue that ‘structuration’ (Giddens, 1984) is evident on social media, with the agency of the user and the structures surrounding platforms—both physical and customary—equally at play in the reproduction of social practices. The benefit of including structuration as a facet of practice theory in this thesis stems from its recognition that both social structures formed in constrained systems (such as social media platforms) and the actions of agents within these systems are vital in the reproduction of social practices, although crucially neither structure nor agency has primacy. Fuchs also notes how structuration explains this interdependence in social media, stating:

Media are techno-social systems, in which information and communication technologies enable and constrain human activities that create knowledge that is produced, distributed and consumed with the help of technologies in a dynamic and reflexive process that connects technological structures and human agency. (2014b, p. 37)

Returning to the example of hashtags, these are now supported across various platforms, and how they are used today varies based on what the user expects and needs from the platform. These uses include locating content on a specific topic (Burgess & Baym, 2020; Leaver et al., 2020), creation of temporal publics (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015), and as identity markers (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Page, 2012). These have become normative social practices on social media, due to users’ shared, experiential

understanding of what they are able to do with them. As Giddens suggests, these situated practices are not restricted to a specific time or place (1984, p. 25), but instead are reflective of all users of social media.

Social media practices such as these connect people across time and space, through bodily actions and material objects. Social media platforms are objects, as are the devices used to access them and the various texts created and shared on them. When these objects are combined with the bodily activity of social media users—such as when they engage with these platforms on a range of devices—a system begins to take form from the structure of the material objects shaping normative behaviour within its confines. As Ortner observed of Giddens’ work, “the study of practice is not an antagonistic alternative to the study of systems, structures, but a necessary complement to it” (1984, pp. 173–174).

Another example of a normative practice for many young adults in Australia is checking their social media first thing in the morning (Yellow, 2018). The act of waking up and then immediately picking up a smart phone to check on the overnight social media activity is a *bodily action* (i.e., picking up the phone and opening social media apps) with a specific material *object* (i.e., a smart phone) that takes place in an intimate *space* (i.e., the bedroom). This type of practice is enacted by a diverse group of people not only in Australia but globally, with any number of different smart devices used to open a range of social media apps. Thus, all social media practices involve a person who must physically engage (bodily action) with some kind of internet-enabled device (object), with the location of where this action can take place (space) limited only by the availability of an Internet connection.

These bodily activities and material objects act to ground and connect practice across space and time, contributing to the durability of the practice itself in situated occurrences (Nicolini, 2012). That is, the commonality of the practice is what connects social media users

across space and time. While the content and the people or accounts that are engaged with may differ, the practices involved in accessing and responding to them have become normative. Sharing memes, uploading photos, and commenting on other users' posts are all examples of durable practices that have become normative, and that can be seen across different platforms, and within different wider social and cultural contexts.

Couldry's examination of media as practice also highlights the importance of materiality, specifically as it concerns what people do with media—be it to read, watch, listen, or create it—and frames the lines of inquiry developed when researching practices (2004), such as elaborated in this thesis. What everyday users do with both social media apps and the news media they are exposed to on them is central to the arguments developed here.

Thus, the elements of practice theory have a practical application in this thesis. As discussed in Chapter 1, the purpose for using social media, or 'use context', can be categorised according to two broad groups of users: everyday users, and content creators. Following Schatzki's (2001) approach to practice theory—in which practices can be understood as involving an array of human activities underpinned by skills, presuppositions and tacit knowledge—a line is drawn here between everyday users and content creators based on whether the individual has a desire for, and pursues, economic gain through their social media activity (Bolin, 2019). This delineation is necessary to establish the scope of this thesis, which aims to uncover the normative practices of everyday users of social media platforms, rather than those of content creators.

Content creators are defined in this thesis as users who have a specialised knowledge of social media platforms and engage in specific activities to take advantage of the potential audience reach afforded by these platforms. Their knowledge is gained through experience as well as productive and reproductive work on these platforms (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020;

Cotter, 2019). It includes knowledge of, and access to, the advanced platform features reserved for users who convert their accounts into a professional mode, and who have a working understanding of how each platform recommender algorithm prioritises content for potential audiences. Everyday users do not generally perform the same practices as professional content creators around, for example, building an audience, increasing exposure, or accruing a portfolio (see Bucher, 2012, 2017; Cotter, 2018; Leaver et al., 2020), which are generally only applied to the production of content. These ‘productive curation’ practices are beyond the scope of this thesis project.

On the other hand, everyday users of social media platforms, who make up the majority of the accounts created, do not have access to professional account affordances and are generally not trying to economically benefit from their daily social media use, beyond perhaps entering promotional competitions for free products and services. Instead, their productive practices tend to centre on expressions of identity (Davis, 2017), and it is arguable whether they allocate more attention and time to consumptive curation practices, as discussed further in section 3.4.

While there is an important opportunity for media scholars to investigate the practices of emerging content creators who are in the initial stages of converting their social media presence into professional accounts, this thesis focuses on those everyday users who are primarily engaging with social media to maintain relationships, be entertained, or to stay informed. This latter group has to date received little scholarly attention in relation to their normative practices with algorithmic selection on social media platforms.

In summary, everyday users of social media are best defined through their practices and habits of usage on these platforms. In designing the data collection for this research project with practice theory in mind, I have identified the need for a taxonomy of everyday

user curation practices to be established, which has not been addressed in previous scholarly work. This approach validates the everyday consumptive curation practices of everyday users who may not engage with platform affordances that leave a public record of interaction, such as liking or commenting on a post, or sharing a post themselves.

It is important to note, however, that while user behaviours are well suited for analysis using a framework of practice theory, their practices are informed by the content they are exposed to, and this content is not created in a vacuum of personal interest. Therefore, clearly defining the context of the practice being analysed is vital for the application of the theory to produce meaningful findings, and it is for this reason that in this research project, the curation practices of everyday users have been examined within the context of their consumption of news and cultural commentary content, as defined in Chapter 2. The study of other contexts such as personal communications, education and career building, or expressions of identity and self are beyond the scope of this thesis.

In summary, within this context of user experiences with cultural commentary content, there is a need to examine how everyday users' practices are formed from their experiential use of algorithmically mediated social media platforms. The following section examines the theories of platform affordances that will frame my analysis of how users interact with and experience social media platforms.

3.3 Platform affordances

While the application of practice theory to social media use is one of the approaches taken in this thesis, more specific lenses are needed to investigate the relationship between user and system. Nicolini (2017) warns against a “weak programme” application of practice theory that results in simply describing or reporting on practices. Accordingly, while this thesis aims

to catalogue the curation practices of everyday users of social media platforms, it does not do so with a view to simply describing and recording what these practices are. Rather, the application of practice theory as presented here functions as a starting point for understanding everyday users' motivations and expectations of their social media experiences.

This section aims to establish platform interfaces and their affordances as the site of experiential learning of algorithms. It introduces the concept of object affordances (Gibson, 1966; Norman, 1999, 2013), the 'discoverability framework' (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019), and the 'mechanisms and conditions framework' (Davis, 2020) as effective means by which to analyse social media affordances and how everyday users engage with them.

3.3.1 Affordances

As one of the aims of this thesis is to create a taxonomy of curation practices on social media platforms, a framework is needed for understanding how everyday users are able to enact agency and curate their social feeds. A useful concept in this regard is object affordances, and specifically, how the concept of affordances can be applied to non-tactile objects such as software and the graphical user interfaces (GUI) of social media platforms.

The concept of affordances was coined by ecological psychologist James J. Gibson in 1966, who took the verb 'to afford' and converted it into a noun to describe those elements within the environment that can provide something to an animal (including the human animal):

I have coined this word as a substitute for *values*, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill. What

they *afford* the observer, after all, depends on their properties. (p. 285, emphasis in original)

This definition positions affordances in relation to the animal: what it perceives to be of possible use in the environment, and how this perception is formed in relation to its needs in the moment. Bucher and Helmond (2017) illustrate this relational property of affordances through the example of fire. As an object, fire has many uses, such as throwing light to illuminate what is in the dark, providing warmth against the cold, or producing heat to cook foods. However, fire can also damage and destroy property, or injure and kill animals, crops, and people. The utility that fire can afford is therefore perceived in the moment of need, and according to the outcome of the action in relation to the person exercising the affordance.

The concept was taken further in 1988 by cognitive engineer Donald Norman in the context of object design rather than naturally occurring objects. Norman argued that humans were able to more or less work out how to make use of a designed object that they had never encountered before based on observation of its affordances; in other words, the very design of objects suggests to people how they should be used (Norman, 1999). Human-computer interaction scholars embraced this approach to design analysis in studying how GUIs inform a user of potential actions, an approach that continues to inform user experience and interface design today (Manzerolle & Daubs, 2021). Norman (2013) later refined the concept of affordance to specifically refer to the actions made possible by an object, and introduced the concept of ‘signifiers’ to differentiate between the affordances that make those actions possible and the visual clues that suggest how these possibilities are communicated: “Signifiers specify how people discover those possibilities: signifiers are signs, perceptible signals of what can be done. Signifiers are of far more importance to designers than are affordances” (Norman, 2013, p. xv).

The ability to differentiate between affordances and signifiers on smart phones (that is, Internet enabled devices commonly used to access social media) is complicated by the fact that touch screens act as both a physical affordance for navigating the device operating system and apps, and as GUIs that include signifiers for what the operating system and apps can do. The affordances of social media platforms themselves are usually confined to a mobile device screen: the physical affordances of the touch screen allow users to scroll up, down and side to side, to zoom in and out, and to engage with menu options. As software programs, social media platforms rely entirely on signifiers to alert users to the affordances that might be present, with many signifiers becoming standardised across different social media platforms based on web-design principles (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), such as the ‘like’ button being shaped like a heart, the ‘share’ button including an arrow, and the near ubiquitous inclusion of a ‘hamburger’ (three horizontal lines) or ‘meatball’ (three horizontal dots) menu icons. This thesis will maintain the distinction between affordance and signifier as terms and employ both as appropriate, such as where the platform affordance for reporting content is hidden behind a signifier menu.

Whereas Gibson’s definition of affordances allows for any and all actions that might be possible (1966), Norman (2013) suggests that the design of an object will suggest its use; that is, perceptions of the object’s available uses are shaped in part by the individual’s previous experiences, what they believe to be true, and what they are hoping to achieve. It is Norman’s concept of perceived affordance that has become prevalent in discussions of platform interface, especially for social media platforms (boyd, 2010; Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Nonetheless, Nagy and Neff (2015) have built on Norman’s distinction between possible and perceived uses with their concept of imagined affordances, where the individual imagines what is possible through available signifiers and acts based on what they have imagined to be possible. An example of an affordance on social media

platforms is the ability to cross post content to both an Instagram and a linked Facebook account at the time of posting content on Instagram, which is signified by an on/off toggle when composing a new post. Affordances, therefore, are what users of social media engage with whenever they interact with a social media platform, and are both imagined and context dependant.

Given that one of the aims of this thesis is to document curation practices and evaluate their effectiveness against the potential determinism of recommender algorithms, it engages two other theoretical frameworks to explore how everyday users perceive and engage with social media platform affordances. McKelvey and Hunt's (2019) notion of *discoverability* provides another lens for exploring the relationship between affordances and algorithmic processing outcomes, foregrounding, as it does, the role of the technology that users engage with. Davis's (2020) *mechanisms and conditions* is a useful framework for examining how affordances present to different users within the context of their experiences with them. Both are complimentary and allow for an exploration of both the user's experiences as well as the design of platforms in understanding how normative practices form here.

3.3.2 Discoverability

'Discoverability' (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019) provides a useful framework for analysing research participant's experiences with various social platforms, and how their experience of locating and engaging with different platforms results in different curation practices. I argue that the ease of finding and consuming content on a social media platform, that is, its discoverability, affects not only how platform algorithms are perceived and experienced, but how everyday users form beliefs and expectations about what their curation actions will achieve. Even though McKelvey and Hunt explicitly do not use the term 'affordance', their

framework pays attention not only to the design of platform interfaces in steering user behaviours but also to the algorithmic mediation that is present in determining how users are subsequently exposed to content. As a concept, discoverability brings together the platform's *surrounds*, or ways of managing user choices, and its *vectors*, the pathways to content, as a means with which to explore how these design choices shape the experiences that users have as a result.

Surrounds and vectors can be seen as both encompassing affordances and signifiers, as well as extending the relational action of affordances to the algorithmic processes that are enacted when users interact with the platform. The term surrounds includes not just the many interaction points that may be available, but also the full design and layout of platform GUIs that guide users' interactions, for example, how screen space is utilised on various devices such as desktop browsers or mobile device apps, as well as how menus and interaction points are laid out (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019). Each design choice is made to nudge users towards certain actions without always specifically constraining what a user can do. Preferred actions are enabled by affordances that are placed in prominent positions on screen and are easily identified as such by everyday users.

Vectors represent the different ways in which a user may be served content within these surrounds, and how these pathways and choices can affect what content is seen after algorithmic processing—processing that may at times prioritise platform objectives over user experience. In semiotics, vectors act as visual direction cues for the viewer, inviting their eyes to be drawn to a particular path. Although McKelvey and Hunt (2019) do not expressly link this term to its use in semiotics, their usage within the context of content discoverability bears a close resemblance to the definition provided by Kress and van Leeuwen, who state that:

while the English language—whether in speech or in writing—expresses processes by words of the category ‘action verbs’, visually they are expressed by elements that can be formally defined as *vectors*, and while language expresses locative circumstances with adverbs or prepositional phrases (e.g. ‘*in* the woods’), visually they are expressed by the formal characteristics that create the contrast between foreground and background. (2021, p. 45, emphasis in original)

Take as an example the Instagram iOS app interface seen by everyday users (i.e., the interface seen by users who do not have a professional or business account) as of late 2021, as shown in Figure 3-1: below.

Figure 3-1: Instagram iOS Interface – Main Feed, October 2021

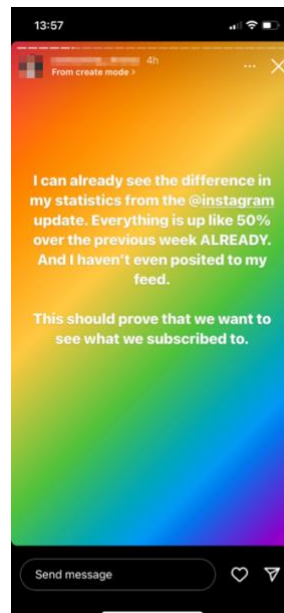


I took this screenshot when I first opened the Instagram app for the day. The app presents menu options at the top left and bottom of the screen. The popular ‘stories’ feature takes up the top fifth of the screen space, while the remaining space is filled with a standard post. Both the visible stories and the posts feature content from accounts that I follow although these are not shown in chronological order. From this example we can see that the surrounds promote

further engagement with the content that is already within a user's preferences, which forms a vector for which content the algorithm will include on the timeline. The addition of a "new posts" button overlay is a vector that encourages users to regularly check for new content, which Seaver (2018) has likened to a type of trap to keep users on the platform. Engagement with content also acts as a vector within the 'discovery' section of Instagram, accessed from the lower menu section, where suggestions are made based on both content and collaborative filtering by the recommender algorithm.

Nonetheless, each user will approach the app differently based on their wants and needs in the moment, as well as their overall familiarity with the app's interface, and the algorithmic processing driving content onto the feed. Figure 3-2: below was taken from an Instagram story shared by a content creator with a relatively small audience size in late March 2022.

Figure 3-2: Instagram iOS Interface – Stories, April 2022



This story is significant as it refers to Instagram's introduction in late March of 2022 of optional alternative social feed settings from the main menu, including the 'following' option

that effectively presents content from accounts that the user follows in chronological order from newest to oldest, without algorithmic mediation (Mosseri, 2022). The screenshot shows the content creator discussing the impact that this new affordance has had on their audience's engagement with their content, as well as their personal opinion that "This should prove that we want to see what we subscribed to".

The addition of alternative feed settings provides yet another vector for content discoverability, albeit without any obvious signifier on the main screen that these alternate feed types are available. Whereas one user might start by scrolling through the stories options at the top of screen, another might scroll through their main feed. Yet another might start by switching to the new 'following' feed, or even dive straight into the 'discovery' page. As such, each user can follow different pathways of discoverability on the app. It is important to reiterate here that behaviours are not static, meaning that any and all vectors for discoverability may be engaged by a user at any time. By way of example, my own use of Instagram differs from day to day: I might start by looking at stories on one occasion, on other occasions I might start by scrolling through the main feed, especially if a particularly interesting post is presented.

Having established the relevance of discoverability and how the various intersections of surrounds and vectors can create different flows around affordances, I now use the framework of mechanisms and conditions to examine how platform affordances shape the experiences of everyday users.

3.3.3 Mechanisms and conditions of affordance

Many scholars have explored the role of affordances on various online platforms, which reinforces the notion of affordances as central to user experience design. Yet, Davis (2020)

draws attention to the tendency for affordances to be described as binary in nature within the academic literature: an object either affords an action or it does not¹². While this view of affordances is common and remains relevant, Davis suggests reframing questions related to affordances away from ‘what’ affordances allow users to do, towards ‘how’ affordances allow or disallow actions. This approach leans into using the concept of signifiers alongside affordances to better interpret how users understand the platform interfaces they are engaging with.

Davis introduced a mechanisms and conditions framework for exploring how affordances are experienced. In this framework, the *mechanisms* are the ‘how’ of affordances, which are explored through verbs, for example, request, demand, encourage, discourage, refuse, or allow action. While each verb here represents a specific way of doing, it is important to view Davis’s framework as being flexible in its application of terms, and to recognise the ambiguity that an affordance may present to an end user. Drawing on the previous example of Instagram and its iOS app interface, we can apply a mechanisms analysis to demonstrate how the platform’s affordances and signifiers:

- *Request* users to upload their own content by placing plus symbols in both the stories and lower menu area;
- *Demand* that users submit a valid email address to create an account to use the platform;
- *Encourage* users to refresh their news feed with the frequent inclusion of the ‘new posts’ overlay button;

¹² The notable exceptions are Gibson (1966) and Norman (2013) themselves, who advocated for nuance in the understanding of affordances.

- *Discourage* disengagement with advertising on the platform by obscuring the ‘hide ad’ option behind a three horizontal dot menu icon (known as the “meatball” menu);
- *Refuse* content that portrays graphic nudity or sex, using algorithmic image processing to automatically take down the offending content (Gillespie, 2018), or shadowbanning images that may not necessarily go against community standards but may be viewed as overly sexualised in nature (Are & Paasonen, 2021);
- *Allow* users to hold multiple accounts, and even make it easy for users to switch between them within the app.

However, with each of the above examples it is important to note that the experience and expectations of individual users can impact whether an affordance is in fact requested or demanded; allowed or encouraged; or even encouraged or discouraged. Davis gives an example from her research where a participant felt encouraged to share multiple posts each day on Instagram until her sister reprimanded her, complaining that she was “clogging the feed”, and that her reach would be affected as a result. The participant then felt that the platform was discouraging her from sharing content (Davis, 2020, p. 56).

This example not only illustrates how affordances can be interpreted differently by different users, it also introduces the second part of Davis’s framework—that is, of conditions of affordance which include: *perception* (how a user identifies an affordance based on their skills and experience with an object), *dexterity* (the mental and physical ability to use an affordance), and *cultural and institutional legitimacy* (the formal and informal rules surrounding the use of an object) (Davis, 2020, p. 61). The Instagram example above highlights how *perception* provides the critical context required for an analysis of the affordances in question—how each sister perceived the affordance, and how—or even if—they would engage with it. Next, *dexterity* aligns with concepts of both digital and media

literacy, and more specifically for social media platforms, algorithmic literacy (Swart, 2021). Dexterity involves the proposition that a user's knowledge and experience of algorithms will affect their perception of which affordances are present—especially those affordances without obvious signifiers or signifiers that are hidden in menus—and what their effect might be. Finally, *cultural and institutional legitimacy* refers to the conditions of life that shape how affordances are perceived and the dexterity with which a user can interact with them. Whereas the conditions of *perception* and *dexterity* suggest there is a level playing field in engaging with affordances, the condition of *cultural and institutional legitimacy* acknowledges that social structures beyond the control of the user can impact how they experience and perceive affordances. Due to the relative demographic homogeneity of participants recruited for this thesis, I focus on the *perception* and *dexterity* conditions of Davis's framework to explore how each participant understands platform affordances and the algorithmic recommender systems on these platforms, as well as how participants can influence the latter through the former.

Affordances play a critical role in our understanding of how algorithms are experienced on social platforms, and the *mechanisms and conditions* framework provides a valuable lens for examining how curation practices are formed from the user's point of view. It complements an awareness of *discoverability*, and together these offer a holistic approach for analysing the affordances engaged with by the participants in this digital ethnographic research project.

Having introduced a robust framework for discussing the affordances that users engage with, I will now turn to the users themselves and describe how affordances shape their normative behaviours. In the next section, I draw on further work from Davis (2017) and other scholars to present a framework for examining curation practices on social media.

3.4 Curation on social media platforms

There is a large body of work devoted to social media curation and algorithmic processing, which discusses both curation by the algorithm as well as curation by the user (Bakker, 2014; Bruns, 2018; Davis, 2017; Merten, 2021; Swart, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016). Algorithmic curation occurs when the algorithm's logic decides which content to show or hide from a user and where to position it in a feed—this is a feature of all social media platforms where a chronological timeline is no longer offered (DeVito et al., 2018; Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017; Just & Latzer, 2017; Thurman et al., 2019).¹³ Audience or user curation encompasses decisions on what content to view and engage with or block, which accounts to follow or unfollow, and what content to share and with whom (boyd, 2014; Bruns, 2018; Davis, 2017; Merten, 2021; Sveningsson, 2015; Swart, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016). This thesis explores the practices that are engaged in by everyday users in an attempt to exert agency in an ongoing way within social media systems. Particular attention is paid to how effective or ineffective these practices might be, and how these practices are developed through users' experiences with algorithms on these platforms.

The analysis of the data presented in this thesis relies on two frameworks for investigating the nature of online curation, as developed by Thorson and Wells (2016) and Davis (2017). Thorson and Wells refer to social media feeds as 'curated flows' of the news and information to which users are exposed (2016). Curation of these flows is defined by the authors as "the production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of content" (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 310). The authors situate these practices within a concept of networked

¹³ As discussed earlier, Instagram implemented two alternative feed options that users can select from, one of which is 'following' which is effectively a chronological feed.

personal information flows online, where multiple actors are identified as curators of any one user's personalised social feeds and timelines:

To curate is to select and organize, to filter abundance into a collection of manageable size, one that in its smaller shape fulfills an informational or strategic need more efficiently than the buzzing flow of all available options. We propose that each actor in an individual's egocentric public is a curator, curating a selection ("flow") of content for the individual's consideration. (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 313)

These authors note that a curator is not a discrete entity; rather, there are multiple curators and a curator may overlap with other curators in shaping individual feeds. They identify five curator types, the first of which are journalists and media outlets that continue to gatekeep content through editorial decisions of what news to cover or investigate, as well as which news to then promote through their social media accounts. While this content continues to play a critical role in what is seen and discussed on social media, Thorson and Wells argue that in this context their gatekeeping function involves promoting a vast array of content online, rather than the repressing function they perform with legacy media channels where publishing space or broadcasting time is constrained.

The second type of curator are strategic communicators such as politicians and private corporations, and these can set the agenda for discussion or use financial means to target users who they would like to see their content. I argue that many cultural intermediaries such as social media influencers can also fall under the banner of strategic communicators although these are not explicitly included in Thorson and Wells' discussion. A third type of human curator is the individual user, who enacts personal curation on their feed through decisions regarding which accounts to follow or which content to engage with. This hints at the relationship between an individual user's experience with algorithms and curation

practices but without explicitly exploring this connection. The fourth type of curator are the social contacts of an individual user, who are typically friends, family, and acquaintances rather than celebrities or public figures. Social contacts influence news media that is seen on social platforms through the content that they choose to share and promote, or the topics they raise and discuss. Finally, algorithmic filters are the fifth type of curator identified by Thorson and Wells, and these curate through their ability to hide or promote content based on interpretations of the individual user's data points.

This framework provides an excellent starting point for a discussion about how and to what extent each curator type affects individual user experiences of social media, as well as where they overlap, and importantly, where personal agency is able to influence content selection. This thesis is centred on understanding the personal curation space, that is, Thorson and Wells' third type of curator, by examining end user agency and how this intersects with the other four curator types to create normative curatorial behaviours, and the effect these have on user exposure to news and cultural commentary.

Davis (2017) takes a different approach to understanding social media curation in her framework, one which speaks to both production and consumption of content on social platforms within the wider context of all social media content, that is, not specifically related to news media. Her framework distinguishes curatorial actions across four dimensions by further dividing productive and consumptive curation into human intervention (which she terms 'network curation'), and algorithmic and architectural bounds (which she refers to as 'curatorial code'). Productive curation refers to the many decisions that users make in regard to the content that they create and share on social platforms, such as how their identity should be represented or which personal details should be shared, and with whom. For example, an image of a user with their new romantic partner might be shared to signify a change in

relationship status but is hidden from the user's ex in the post settings as a means of protecting their privacy from that individual. Network curation is also affected by the platform affordances (although being able to select specific individuals to hide content from is not available on all social platforms, Twitter and Instagram being notable examples) as well as algorithmic recommendations that may or may not promote the content to people within the individual's personal network—including their ex—in the first place.

Consumptive curation, on the other hand, refers to actions an individual might take to either encourage or discourage seeing particular content on their feed. Using a similar example, if a user has recently broken up with someone, they may choose to unfollow or hide content from their ex so as not to see new content from them (network curation).

Alternatively, they might choose to frequently and intentionally seek out their ex's profile, gesturing and commenting on all of their content so as to encourage the algorithm to promote it in their feed (curatorial code). This framework for consumptive curation is advantageous in analytics terms in that it incorporates human agency, platform affordances, and algorithmic filtering into a holistic approach, acknowledging that curatorial actions taken by individual users can be driven by each of these factors concurrently. As it specifically addresses user agency in relation to social media practices and identifies a number of curatorial practices that can be mapped to the framework, this framework is of high relevance to this thesis. In my research, therefore, I am answering Davis's call for a typology of practices, and I do this within the bounds of space and time that is Australia in 2021 and early 2022.

The two curatorial frameworks discussed above have guided the grounded theory approach to data analysis in this project, with consumptive curation practices on social media platforms forming the basis of my own conception of *active and passive curation* as presented and discussed at length in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. I now present the theoretical

framework used in this thesis to examine the algorithmic literacy of research participants, which brings together concepts from affordances and curation to explore how users develop practices on social media platforms to negotiate with recommender algorithms.

3.5 Algorithmic literacy

As discussed in the previous chapter, the use of algorithms has become increasingly prevalent in a range of day-to-day contexts, rendering their presence almost invisible through their ubiquity (Willson, 2017). Cotter and Reisdorf (2020) refer to algorithms as experience technologies, in which users learn about their functions through repeated interactions. These authors make this assertion in the context of a broader argument about digital inclusivity, arguing that socioeconomic factors contribute to algorithmic literacy; that is, as algorithms are experience technologies, socioeconomically disadvantaged users who have limited access to online devices will therefore also have limited experiences with algorithmic processing. As more and more civic and day-to-day functions are digitised and brought online, understanding the role of algorithms in what and how content is presented to users forms a first line of defence in assessing the quality of the information presented.

I found this framing of algorithms as experience technologies, and algorithmic literacy as impacting outcomes in online participation, to be increasingly relevant as I analysed the ethnographic data collected for this project. This led me to investigate frameworks for interpreting users' algorithmic literacy that would be appropriate to use with the data I had already collected, rather than introducing a new assessment instrument to my participants after the fact.

In Australia, the annual Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) (Thomas et al., 2021) report examines digital inclusion with respect to the dimensions of barriers to access,

affordability, and digital ability. Digital ability in this context refers to the operational skills required to successfully use Internet-connected devices and navigate online services but does not specifically address algorithmic awareness or literacy. While digital ability is still relevant to this thesis, in seeking a fuller understanding of algorithmic literacy, an additional, algorithm specific measure was found in the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness (AMCA) scale developed by Zarouali et al. (2021). The AMCA-scale is well suited to the analysis undertaken for this thesis as it specifically measures algorithmic awareness in relation to the media content that users are exposed to online, rather than other types of algorithmic processing such as those found in software development, data science, finance monitoring, or automated translation services.

The AMCA-scale was initially developed to gauge five dimensions of algorithmic awareness. The scale goes beyond measuring simple awareness of the existence of algorithms to testing understanding of the functions of algorithms as they relate to online media content, specifically: *content filtering*, *automated decision-making*, *human-algorithm interplay*, *algorithmic persuasion*, and *ethical considerations* (Zarouali et al., 2021, p. 2). Firstly, content filtering in the AMCA-scale refers to a person's awareness of algorithms as being responsible for filtering the vast amount of available content online, and thereby responsible for personalisation of the content that users see—or do not see—on their social feeds. Secondly, the scale recognises that these filtering decisions are part of an automated decision-making process that takes place without human intervention. Thirdly, it measures individuals' awareness that their own actions online create data points that drive this personalisation through human-algorithm interplay. Fourthly, it tests awareness that algorithmic persuasion can influence not only which available actions users might take but also their attitudes towards the content they are seeing. And finally, it explores user awareness of the ethical considerations around data privacy, how data is collected and processed, and what biases may

be established in algorithmic code that affects the other four dimensions. Although Zarouali et al. were unable to provide sufficient empirical evidence from their study to distinguish the fourth dimension of algorithmic persuasion from the other dimensions (2021, p. 6), resulting in its removal from the final AMCA-scale, they nonetheless recommend that other scholars investigate how that concept could be reliably measured. As I found algorithmic persuasion—along with the other four dimensions—to be directly relevant to the practices observed and the reflective comments made by participants during data collection, all five of these dimensions were included in my application of the AMCA-scale against data already collected.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the investigation of the curatorial behaviours of everyday social media users in this thesis adopts an analytical framework of practice theory to investigate the limited points of interaction that platform affordances allow, the ways in which consumptive curation practices are framed, and the effects of algorithmic literacy on these curation practices. Practice theory gives space for the exploration of reproductive actions on social media platforms that are both shaped by, and in turn shape, the contexts within which they exist, forming a system of interactions between user and platform, platform algorithms, end user device, content, and other users.

As practice theory suggests researchers highlight the role of individual agency in a communicative system, attention is also given in this study to the platform affordances that are available to users, as well as how these affordances make themselves known to each user, and the mechanisms and conditions that exist for these affordances to be of value to the user based on their experiences, needs, and expectations. These affordances are the mechanisms through which consumptive curation practices are enacted, allowing users to attempt to exert

their agency over news and information flows on algorithmically mediated social media platforms. Analysis of these curation practices and their impact is further framed by the concept of algorithms as experience technologies, where users' repeated exposure to and interaction with algorithms increases their understanding of how they process information flows.

By using these frameworks to analyse the data collected for this thesis, users and their actions are placed front and centre of the investigation, allowing new light to be shone on their communicative role within these complex and ubiquitous social media systems. While this research project is concerned with users' curation of news and cultural commentary, the theoretical assembly discussed here may also be beneficial to future studies of social media users within other contexts such as job hunting, parenting support, or dating. In the next chapter, I outline the data collection methodology for this thesis that has been informed by the theoretical approaches described above.

Chapter 4: An ethical plan of inquiry and analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present a robust and ethical approach to data collection and analysis that addresses my research questions. Social media companies provide users with platforms where they can create networks of connections, view content shared by their connections, and in turn share content with them. This provides challenges to undertaking ethical research, as the phenomena to be studied exist within this context of public, semi-public, and private social media environments (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). The aim of this thesis is to understand the consumptive curation practices of everyday social media users, the motivations behind these practices, and the impact that they have on the amount of news media content that users are exposed to. A ‘naturalistic approach’ to the study design was taken, in which observing these practices within the contexts in which they occur has been critical to understanding how they have emerged and why they are enacted (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 7–8). This type of approach seeks to observe social phenomena “in concrete situations as they occur independently of scientific manipulation” (Brewer, 2000, p. 33), and preferences qualitative research methods such as interviews and direct observation, such as in an ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

An ethnographic approach to studying news curation ensures that the elements that constitute practices—“of materials, competences and meanings” (Shove et al., 2012, p. 24)—are captured during the data collection period. This allows for detailed analysis into the emerging practices that “persist, shift and disappear when *connections* between elements of these three types are made, sustained or broken” (Shove et al., 2012, p. 19, emphasis in original). I argue that a detailed analysis of social media curation practices is best achieved

through data collected through direct, situated observation methods. For this reason, this study used ‘media go-alongs’ (Jørgensen, 2016; Møller & Robards, 2019), where participants provided a guided tour of their social media activity capturing the materials (surrounds and vectors) that they interact with on these platforms and their individual competences (algorithmic literacy and practices). These were supplemented with semi-structured interviews that provided participants with an opportunity to self-reflect and self-report on their practices to capture the meanings behind their actions. To situate this behaviour in the news cycle, this study also used additional quantitative content analysis to understand whether user experiences of news related content on social media were aligned to mainstream news reporting.

The chapter provides a justification for the mixed methods digital ethnographic approach (Pink et al., 2016) used for data collection and for the grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) which was used to draw out findings that contribute to our understanding of consumptive curatorial practices on social media and their effectiveness. The chapter opens with an overview of digital ethnography before presenting the recruitment and sampling strategy used, and highlights some of the challenges experienced during these processes. I then present the data collection methods chosen and describe how I implemented these methods to obtain thick data (Latzko-Toth et al., 2022). I also outline the challenges and ethical concerns associated with these methods, and my justification for their inclusion in the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the iterative approach to data analysis that was undertaken to develop the findings presented and which is discussed in the chapters that follow.

4.2 A digital ethnography of curation practices and their effect on the social feed

As discussed in Chapter 3, practices cannot be separated from the people who enact them, and the contexts within which they are enacted (Ortner, 1984). For this reason, I selected an ethnographic approach to collecting data about curatorial practices on social media as this allowed me to participate in the environment in which the practices occurred, and provided further opportunities for the study of these practices in real time (Brewer, 2000). I determined that qualitative methods such as ethnography and interviews were better suited than quantitative approaches to the exploration of questions relating to experience or intention, as they “seek to discover and to describe in narrative reporting what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them” (Erickson, 2011, p. 43). The often-cited Hammersley and Atkinson definition of ethnography states that:

ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts—in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. (2007, p. 3)

Social scientists have extended ethnographic concepts to address the ubiquitous use of online technology in modern daily life which has created parallel online and offline environments of activity (Robinson & Schulz, 2009). Pink et al. propose digital ethnography as a means by which “we might do ethnography as the digital unfolds as part of the world that we co-inhabit with the people who participate in our research” (2016, pp. 1–2). Digital ethnography is achieved by incorporating and adapting traditional ethnographic techniques to the online environment, which allows the researcher to observe the practices that participants engage in

there, as well as the cultures and communities within which they are enacted (Caliandro, 2017). Burrell (2017) also makes a case for digital ethnography to be considered as an evolution of more traditional concepts of ethnography, one that extends the field of study to a digital network, which in the case of this thesis involves the social media platforms that create personalised information feeds through algorithmic recommender systems.

In this ethnography, I began by interviewing a convenience sample of 13 participants ($n=13$) aged 18 to 30 about their social media use. I then followed their personal accounts before conducting an initial media go-along where I noted the types of accounts and content that appeared in their social feeds. Following personal accounts allowed me to remotely observe some participant interactions with cultural commentary content, as this content was frequently promoted to me within my own social feed and is not available to observers who are not connected within the relevant platforms. I asked these participants to capture screen shots of news and cultural commentary in between interviews to act as a private archive and memory aid to record their social media experiences with this type of content. I also monitored my own social feeds in between interviews for examples of where their activity had been used to collaboratively filter content, such as when they liked or commented on a post and it was promoted onto my feed. I conducted four fortnightly follow-up interviews with media go-alongs and screen shot reviews, taking note of participant practices, their rationale for engaging in these, and the type and origin of the content they saw on their feeds. Figure 4-2 provides a diagram of the data collection process (presented in section 4.2.2.3 below).

While this small sample restricts the generalisability of the findings, the depth of data that I was able to collect from each participant has resulted in rich ethnographic descriptions for this group of users, their consumption and curation practices, their experiences with news

and cultural commentary, and how effective their curation practices were on influencing their social feeds.

A digital ethnography of this kind accommodates data ‘thickening’ due to the more extensive, richer data that are collected via multiple collection methods to “capture the specificity of these uses, their motives and what they mean for the subjects” (Latzko-Toth et al., 2022, p. 160). After collecting the ethnographic data about participant’s consumptive curation of news and information, I undertook a content analysis of the captured news and information to compare it to the output of traditional news media.

Thick data can be captured through a mixed methodology study like this, which is an approach to data collection that is appropriate to the research of practices within a digital ethnography (Born & Haworth, 2017). However, Creswell (2015) cautions researchers against applying the mixed methods label to their work simply to suggest that it uses multiple data collection methods, arguing that this does not reflect the true mixed methods approach of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data that is then integrated to provide richer data to support findings.

This thesis, therefore, does take a true mixed method approach by adopting quantitative content analysis (Rourke & Anderson, 2004) as a means to test other data collected. The data were primarily collected from semi-structured interviews and social media app guided tours or ‘media go-alongs’ (Jørgensen, 2016), where the participants shared their screens with me as they went through their normal social media use while verbalising their motivations for their actions. This data was supplemented by a review of the screenshots that participants captured between interviews of relevant news and cultural commentary content, and further augmented by field observations based on following their accounts, such as the visible curation markers and engagement with news media content I noted when

participants ‘liked’ or commented on content that was visible on my social feeds. Each of these data collection methods is described in greater detail in section 4.2.2 below.

4.2.1 Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

As discussed above, for this plan of inquiry I aimed for thickness over quantity of data, resulting in a data collection program that featured repeated contact with a small group of 13 research participants, which demanded a substantial commitment from them. This longitudinal approach to data collection created a number of challenges, including the need to recruit a convenience sample of participants and iterative responses to recruitment, as described below. This thesis project received ethics approval from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee under project code: 2020/625

4.2.1.1 Recruitment

To start this project, I initially shared an expression of interest request on my personal social media accounts—Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn—in January of 2021. People within my personal networks then shared these posts on their accounts, increasing the potential reach of the recruitment call on these platforms. The expression of interest posts provided a high-level overview of what the project was, what would be involved, and demographic criteria for participation. The criteria stated that potential participants must be between the ages of 18 and 30, be an Australian citizen or permanent resident, and use social media. The request also invited interested individuals to contact me for further information via the direct message function of the platform it was shared on, or by email. As I received expressions of interest, I shared the Participant Information Statement (PIS) and Participant Consent Form (PCF) with these individuals. I also emailed the expression of interest request to organisations engaged in

cultural work with young adult Australians across metro, regional, and rural parts of Australia to assist with participant recruitment through their channels.

As the initial response to the call for participants was weak, I made an amendment request to the project's ethics approval committee to allow for a nominal participation incentive. The approved incentive was for the participants' choice of an AUD\$50 gift card for either the Apple iTunes and App Store, or the Google Play store (self-funded by me) and awarded on completion of the data collection process. I also created an expression of interest webform to simplify the process for interested individuals to contact me and access the PIS, and placed an advertisement on the University of Sydney's research volunteer website. This advertisement remained active until December 31st, 2021, generating a number of expressions of interest that ultimately translated into participation in the study. Ultimately 14 ($n=14$) participants agreed to take part in the project, with one ($n=1$) participant withdrawing shortly before the second scheduled interview, citing that they had not used social media at all during the previous two weeks, and were unlikely to do so in the immediate future. I immediately withdrew the data collected during the first interview with this participant from analysis. As such, a total of 13 ($n=13$) individuals completed the data collection cycle, which began in February 2021 and concluded in March 2022.

4.2.1.2 Sampling overview

The aforementioned challenges to recruitment and the significant commitment required from participants demanded that I use a convenience sample approach to recruitment (Etikan et al., 2016), and this ultimately allowed me to include participants that met the demographic and social media practice criteria, and importantly, were available to me. Given the ubiquity of social media use within society, convenience sampling is an appropriate approach to researching everyday user curation practices although it is not without its drawbacks. As can

be expected when trading potential participant diversity for convenience of recruitment (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Etikan et al., 2016), I ended up with 13 ($n=13$) research participants who demonstrated relative homogeneity of gender, educational, and location, beyond the inclusion criteria of age, social media use, and Australian residency status required for participation. Participants predominantly identified as female, held tertiary qualifications, and resided in the Sydney metropolitan area. This relative homogeneity of participants is appropriate for a digital ethnography of users within a specific time and place as it allows for the rich data collected to be compared with respect to practices among users with similar attributes rather than making an attempt to draw out generalisations about a larger population of more diverse users (Boddy, 2016; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011).

All data was de-identified for the analysis. Table 4-1 below presents an overview of participant demographics and the pseudonyms used in the analytical Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Pseudonyms were taken from the New South Wales State Government's list of popular baby names (NSW Government, n.d.), filtered for age appropriateness, and selected to reflect the participant's stated identity. Throughout Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I occasionally attribute direct quotes to a different participant pseudonym as a means of further anonymising the data presented in this thesis, in recognition of the complexity of ethical considerations that attach to analysing social media content (Taylor et al., 2023).

Table 4-1: Overview of Participant Sample Demographics

Nominal Pseudonym ¹	Pronouns	Age	Location	Education
Jessica	She/her	24	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Sarah	She/her	24	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Lauren	She/her	25	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Chloe	She/her	20	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Samantha	She/her	27	Sydney metro	Tertiary

Georgia	She/her	24	Adelaide metro	Tertiary
Alex	They/them	26	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Stephanie	She/her	26	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Emma	She/her	29	Newcastle metro	High School ²
Rebecca	She/her	30	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Amy	She/her	30	Sydney metro	Tertiary
Olivia	She/her	18	Sydney metro	High School ³
Joshua	He/him	22	Sydney metro	High School ²

¹ Pseudonyms were randomly reassigned throughout Chapters 5, 6 & 7. ² Participant was engaged in tertiary study. ³ Participant had been accepted into tertiary study.

4.2.2 Ethical data collection methods and process

As described above, the research methods were selected for depth rather than breadth of data collection to contribute to the ‘thickening’ of data (Latzko-Toth et al., 2022, p. 200). Depth of data was also prioritised over breadth as a way of acknowledging that social media practices vary not just from person to person, but from context to context for the same person.

Moreover, social media contexts are not static and can be influenced by users’ motivations for using social media (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Fu & Cook, 2021; Whiting & Williams, 2013) as well as the content that users are exposed to on their social feeds, including news and topical information (Merten, 2021). Throughout the project, I collected rich data for analysis by returning to the same participant at regular intervals and drawing on multiple data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews, media go-alongs, screenshot archives, and remote observation of social media use to generate rich ethnographic descriptions. By comparing where the data from these collection methods intersected through a process of triangulation, I was able to test the data for reliability and rigour (Lune & Berg, 2017).

Triangulation is a valuable process within a mixed method approach where qualitative and quantitative data can be integrated for analysis (Turner et al., 2017). However, employing multiple data collections alone does not result in triangulation—data must be selected so that

potential biases in the methods are also differentiated, such as can be found in verbal responses versus observations or material documentation (Heath, 2015) (discussed further below).

As noted above, participant interviews were conducted on a rolling basis between February 2021 and March 2022. As a result, there is little overlap between participant interviews and their reporting periods. For the majority of the data collection period, two to three participants were actively involved in interviews concurrently, with the week starting 5 April 2021 seeing six participants active. I determined that data saturation had been achieved when participants had not presented or discussed and new curation practices during media go-alongs (Fusch & Ness, 2015), which typically occurred during the fourth or fifth meeting.

4.2.2.1 Researcher reflexivity

As a digital ethnographer, I am conscious that I need to acknowledge the biases that my life experiences, values, and point of view bring to the methodology selected, as well as how the data were analysed. I am also a user of social media, a consumer of news media on social media platforms, as well as an Internet user, with long-term experience of digital cultures. As such, I recognise that entering the sites of study required a reflective approach, one that allowed me to present to participants as both an insider and professional researcher, or what Hodgkinson terms an ‘insighter’ (2005). An insider exists “where the researcher is at once an instrument and a guest within the stories of a particular research group” (Sharp, 2021, p. 801). As a social media user myself, I brought with me to this research project my own insider experiences with social media platforms, content, and practices that have developed out of my algorithmic and digital literacy. While this knowledge and experience helped me shape the design of this research project, it also had the potential to influence how I perceived the data, biasing me towards my own preconceived ideas of what practices were in use, why

they were operationalised, and what effects these practices would have on the type and amount of content seen (Berger, 2015; Hodkinson, 2005). This bias could have occurred during the data analysis phase, but also during the data collection phases of the interviews and media go-alongs, and, if unchecked, my provocations could have led participants to focus on the practices I personally wanted to see and the reflections I wanted to hear.

By adopting an insider position in the digital ethnography, I was able to critically check my questioning technique and coding decisions as information came to hand, constantly referring back to the research questions and the study's open frame of inquiry. Further, the multiple data collection methods I employed in this project not only enabled the triangulation of data for reliability, but also acted as a check against my inherent analytical biases. Nevertheless, the insider position was at times challenging to maintain. A high degree of familiarity and congeniality developed between myself and each participant during the data collection period, in part due to the assortment of entertaining content that each participant shared throughout the media go-alongs. Although this material was often difficult to respond to objectively, through the exercise of diligence I was able to ensure that moments of levity were used as a cue to ask the participant reflective questions about the content shared, thereby re-establishing the researcher position I also occupied.

I also consciously employed a reflexive position in the coding and analysis of data, as discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.2.2 Entering the field of social media networks

A key aspect of ethnography is determining the site of fieldwork, where "People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). The field of study for this thesis is the algorithmically mediated social media platforms where participants enacted consumptive

curation practices, observed both directly (see section 4.2.2.5 below) as well as remotely (Postill, 2017). Remote observation required that I situate myself as a user-observer within the social networks of research participants on the platforms that they used, which made these social media platforms the site of study. To gain a richer understanding of consumptive curation practices, any social media platform that featured an algorithmically recommended and personalised social feed was included in the study, rather than a predetermined pool of platforms being set. As a result, eight social media platforms were included in the study: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Reddit, and YouTube, with each participant active on two or more of these. Table 4-2 indicates, using blue shading and annotations, the platforms used by each participant, while Figure 4-1 indicates where participants followed notable news and news-adjacent accounts on these platforms.

Table 4-2: Social Media Platforms Used by Participants

Participant	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	LinkedIn	Tumblr	Reddit	YouTube
Joshua				~		~		
Olivia		*	*					
Sarah				*				
Georgia								
Samantha								
Emma		*						
Amy								
Jessica								
Chloe								
Rebecca								
Lauren								
Alex				*				
Stephanie							^	^

** Participant has multiple accounts for the platform. ^ Participant used the platform without an account.*

~ Platform excluded from study at request of participant.

Figure 4-1: Types of News and News-Adjacent Accounts Participants Followed

Jessica	Instagram	Facebook			Facebook	Instagram
Sarah	Instagram, Twitter	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	YouTube		Facebook	
Amy	Facebook	Facebook	Instagram			
Chloe*	Facebook, Instagram	Instagram*			Facebook	
Samantha	Facebook, Instagram		Facebook, Instagram		Facebook	
Joshua	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok				
Rebecca	Facebook, LinkedIn	Facebook, Instagram				
Emma	Facebook, Twitter	Facebook				
Stephanie			YouTube			YouTube
Lauren		Facebook, Instagram				Facebook, Instagram
Alex	Twitter	Twitter				
Georgia	Facebook	Twitter				
Olivia	Instagram					
	Activists, Academics, and Politicians	Legacy News Media	Journalists		Social News Media	News Satire

* Chloe introduced legacy news media in between the 3rd and the 4th interview.

Social media platforms allow users to create both undirected and directed networks with other platform users or accounts (Kunegis, 2013). In an undirected network, the connection type between each node (or user) is the same or mutual, such as adding a friend on Facebook—that is, both user A and B are connected to each other when the friend request is accepted, regardless of who initiated the request. In a directed network, the connection type is different or not mutual, such as when a Facebook user follows an account or page on the platform, or when a user initially follows an account on Instagram or TikTok. On social media platforms that initially offer a directed network connection (or tie) only, the tie has the

potential to be converted into an undirected one when the account being followed (user B) decides to follow the account that initially started to follow them (user A).

To facilitate the remote observation of participants, I entered the field sites by mutually joining the social networks of participants in an undirected network tie, including where this was not a requirement of the social platform. However, as participants were not obliged to include every platform that they were active on in the study, I only entered those social networks of the platforms where I was invited by the participants (see Table 4-2 above for an overview of the platforms included in the study). I connected to participants with my authentic social media accounts rather than clean, purposely created accounts. I acknowledge that there are risks and concerns associated with the use of authentic social media accounts to create network connections with research participants, and many of these have been outlined by Robards (2013) and Gerrard (2021) in their discussions of sourcing and friending participants on social media. These issues include the need to maintain a professional relationship with research participants, the privacy risk of granting participants reciprocal access to social media activity history, and the potential for the researcher to experience online abuse and harassment.

The reasoning behind my use of authentic social media accounts in undirected network ties was developed through discussions with my supervision team and the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Firstly, an authentic presentation of identity can be a tool for establishing trust with the research participant (Gerrard, 2021; Robards, 2013). In my case, participants were entrusting me with access to their social feeds during media go-alongs, as well as allowing me to observe their social media activity outside of scheduled meeting times; therefore, maintaining trust was integral to the data collection process. Using my authentic accounts also allowed me to quickly establish the rapport

required so that participants would “disclose detailed perspectives about responding to an action or a process” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 156). Participants were able to glean my interests from my social profile details, limited past posts, and limited images shared, just as they might do for any other new network connection they made. Additionally, as recruitment occurred on social media, the presentation of a clean profile might be suspicious to potential recruits who would want to assess the credibility of the person behind the request. To add transparency to the social media recruitment call (Bhatia-Lin et al., 2019; Gelinas et al., 2017), I added information about my role as a researcher and the ongoing data collection for this project to each of my social profiles for the duration of the data collection process.

The benefits of creating network connections with research participants in this study have been manyfold. As per Robards’ (2013) experience, it provided me with opportunities to remotely observe semiotic events on various social media platforms that could later be incorporated into participant interviews, and to challenge my research subjects to reflect on their practices and on content that they might otherwise not have paid attention to, thereby helping to mitigate some of the reliability issues associated with the self-reporting of digital practices (González-Bailón & Xenos, 2022). However, entering a field of study such as social media platforms presented other ethical dilemmas, especially in regard to the privacy expectations of the participants, as well as other users they are connected to.

4.2.2.3 Ethics of researching social media networks and platforms

The ethics of researching networked relations on social media platforms has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Chief among concerns is the question of whether social media posts that are publicly available should be considered public data within a context of implied privacy and informed consent (franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Moreno et al., 2013; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). I argue that since it is not possible to

observe an individual user's situated practices and content consumption experiences on social media in isolation from the content shared by the myriad other users—both everyday and professional—data collection methods should be considered within a framework of informed consent and contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2004; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). As such, I have taken the approach that as my data collection required accessing social media content that was both public and quasi-public, I would only obtain data where informed consent was possible and would proactively take steps to protect the privacy of data where this was not possible. The specific areas where informed consent was not possible and the steps I took to mitigate, or minimise, potential privacy concerns is outlined in detail below.

Situated observation requires access to real world contexts where practices occur (Brewer, 2000; Fine, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Sanjek, 2015). Thus, in my study I had the potential to access content posted by other 3rd party users within the participant's quasi-public social networks, such as where the user had restricted access to their social profiles. The relevant issue is that while these 3rd parties had granted access to the participant to view their content, they had not granted access to me, nor would it have been practical to request informed consent from all of the connections within each participant's social networks. From a contextual integrity point of view (Nissenbaum, 2004), 3rd party users may have an expectation that their content is only viewed by people with whom they have made a network connection even if their content settings render their social media posts public (Franzke et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2013; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Additionally, these 3rd party users may have set their own social media posts to private, or semi-private. For example, Facebook allows users to limit post visibility to 'friends' or additionally to 'friends of friends' which cannot be considered publicly available content. Instagram and Twitter users are able to set their profiles to 'private', requiring anyone who wishes to view their content to request access and be approved by the account holder. In both cases, the change to

the distribution principle created by situated research observation must be addressed through the research design to ensure contextual integrity is upheld.

I have introduced a number of interventions in an effort to address these concerns. Firstly, once a participant provided informed consent (a completed PCF), I provided them with a cheat-sheet on how to make content private or not available to individual users such as me through each social platform's privacy affordances. I reminded them of these affordances before the interviews commenced, as well as their ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Secondly, to extend transparency of the research project to the participants' social networks (Bhatia-Lin et al., 2019; Gelinas et al., 2017), I asked the participants to add a social media post on any platform they used, stating that they were taking part in a research project, that the investigator had joined their social network on the platform and would be looking at their social media activity, and to provide a link to more information about the project (the web form link and PIS). Participants were asked to add another post at the conclusion of the study stating that the research project had concluded and that they were no longer being observed, both of which posts I verified to ensure that they had been added to the participants' social profiles.

Thirdly, I decided to use only audio recordings of the interviews and media go-alongs, with field notes taken to supplement the audio transcripts. While permission for both audio and video recording had been included in the PCF to accommodate the Zoom in-app recording settings, which was used for convenience, the PIS made clear to participants that only audio recordings would be accessed and used for analysis. Where participants consented

to audio but not video recording, a dedicated audio-only recording device was used rather than the in-app recording function¹⁴.

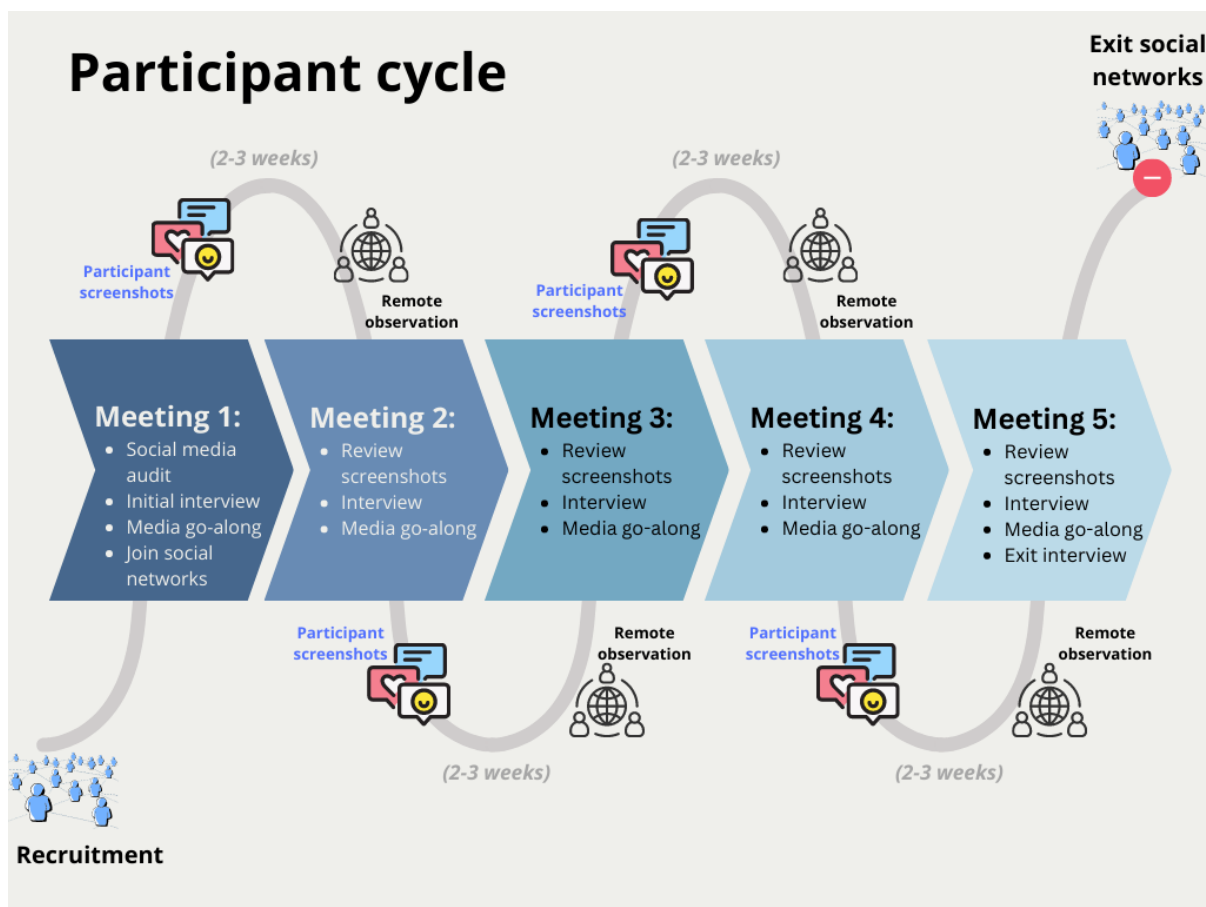
Fourthly, where participants had taken screenshots of posts between interviews, I showed them how to anonymise content from 3rd party network connections who were not public figures before sharing with me either on screen or via file sharing. Participants were also reminded that taking and sharing screenshots was entirely optional at the start of each meeting, and this was clearly stated in the PIS. Additionally, I made the decision not to include any specific examples of social media content in this thesis, either shared by participants or made generally available to the public. Instead, examples of interest are described textually where appropriate in the following chapters.

Finally, as discussed in section 4.2.1.2 above, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Throughout the findings discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 participants are described in deliberately vague terms, non-essential information was changed, and at times pseudonyms were randomly assigned to direct quotes to further obfuscate participant identities (Saunders et al., 2015; Surmiak, 2018).

These approaches to participant privacy and contextual integrity of 3rd party data were integrated into the data collection process. An overview of this data collection process is illustrated in Figure 4-2: , with each method described in greater detail below.

¹⁴ The Zoom videoconferencing application allows the user to enable automatic recording when setting up the meeting link. Once the meeting has started, meeting participants are notified by on screen pop up that recording is in progress, which they can then accept or decline. For participants who did not consent to video recording in the PCF, this feature was disabled when setting up the meeting link.

Figure 4-2: An Illustration of the Participant Data Collection Process for this Thesis



4.2.2.4 Semi-structured interviews

As shown in Figure 4-2, each participant committed to a total of five semi-structured interviews, spaced at least two weeks apart, resulting in a minimum eight-week commitment to the research project. Interviews are a mainstay of qualitative research methods, described as “a conversation with a purpose” (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 65), and “where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 2). I selected semi-structured interviews for this thesis as they are best suited to a grounded theory approach to data analysis, where the researcher must “travel a path through the interview with the participant” (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 73). Semi-structured interviews are so named for the degree of consistency and flexibility they offer as they are

“sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of your research question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meaning to the topic of study” (Galletta, 2013, pp. 1–2). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews was valuable in allowing me to follow lines of inquiry that emerged through participant comments and practices during the interviews, media go-alongs, and optional screenshot reviews, as well as from data collected through remote observation between meetings. The semi-structured interviews also ensured a consistent approach which resulted in data that could be compared across participants.

Interviews were initially offered as either in person or via Zoom videoconference; however, due to movement restrictions introduced by the New South Wales government in June 2021 in response to Covid-19, all interviews were moved to Zoom videoconference from 25th June onward. Conducting interviews via videoconference has become popular with researchers thanks to the cost, time savings, and geographical diversity of participants that they afford (Birks & Mills, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Gray et al., 2020). I selected the Zoom application as it was readily available to me through my university at no cost, offered automatic recording capability to my computer or the cloud, and allowed participants to easily connect to the meeting with the device of their choice and to share screens for the media go-alongs. However, as with any Internet based technology, interviews were subject to the quality of both mine and the participant’s Internet connections (Gray et al., 2020), which were less than ideal at times. Another disadvantage of using Zoom was the inability to select audio recording only, with both video and audio recorded simultaneously even though files were then created as both .mp4 video and separate .mp3 audio only files.

A total of 66 ($n=66$) interviews were conducted during the data collection phase, with one withdrawn from analysis after the participant left the study (see section 4.2.1.1 above), leaving 65 ($n=65$) interviews included in the data analysis. Of these, six ($n=6$) were

conducted in person, with the remaining 59 ($n=59$) conducted via Zoom videoconference. Media go-alongs (see section 4.2.2.5 below), as well as a review of any screenshots taken by the participant (see section 4.2.2.6), were conducted in tandem with each semi-structured interview. The interviews typically lasted between 30 and 35 minutes; however, one was as short as 12 minutes while another was as long as 1 hour and 42 minutes.

The first interview included an audit of participants' social media accounts, which included the number of total network ties they had created on each platform, the proportion of these that were ties to people they had a personal connection to outside of social media, and the nature of the remaining ties, that is, whether they were to accounts held by celebrities, influencers, politicians, journalists, news media organisations, commercial brands, businesses, or other public entities. Participants were also asked about their usage of each platform: the time spent on each, their preferred platform, the primary use for each platform, as well as their initial thoughts and reflections on their social media usage overall. The interview then transitioned into the media go-alongs, as described in section 4.2.2.5 below, which was supplemented with further questioning to elicit the motivations and meanings behind their practices. The interview then closed with a reminder for them to capture screenshots or to be mindful of news related content they might see between then and the next scheduled meeting, as well as a reminder of the need to redact any information that might identify a 3rd party in any screenshots taken (see section 4.2.2.6 below).

The second, third and fourth interviews began with an open invite for participants to reflect on what they had noticed being discussed on social media in the time since the last meeting. Participants were encouraged to refer to any screenshots they had taken during this time as a memory aid for this reflection, with the option of sharing these with me on screen. I also took this opportunity to challenge participants when I had remotely observed interaction

with relevant content on social media that they had not raised during this reflection. The interviews then transitioned into the media go-alongs, before returning to a brief interview where they were asked about any changes to their network connections or social media usage since the previous meeting.

The final interview commenced as per the previous three, but with an additional set of reflective questions at the conclusion that invited participants to comment on their overall social media usage (that is, revisiting the same question from the first interview), as well as their experiences being part of the research project. This final reflection provided additional rich data into participants' motivations and experiences with social media, as well as offering closure to the data collection period. Participants were then invited to mutually unfollow social profiles across platforms, and a link was provided to any participants who wished to share redacted screenshots collected during the data collection period.

The interview question schedule is available in Appendix A.

4.2.2.5 Media go-alongs

As discussed in section 4.2.2.2 above, data collection methods that include self-reporting of practices and experiences can be less than reliable. González-Bailón and Xenos (2022) tested the reliability of research participants self-reporting of news consumption practices using observational data, and found that self-reporting significantly understated the amount of news content seen. As this thesis aims to understand the effect that consumptive curation practices have on the amount of news content seen on social media platforms, a reliable account of the content seen, as well as a mechanism to verify practices, was essential. To address this, I used Jørgensen's (2016) 'media go-along' method of direct observation and interview, which contributed the majority of data collection for this project.

The media go-along combines observation, talk aloud protocol, and an interview into a single data collection method where “participants give verbal and visual tours, framed by the researcher’s discursively constituted invitations for orientation” (Jørgensen, 2016, p. 32). It is ideally suited for the study of user interactions with platform affordances, which are the key mechanisms through which user practices are enacted. Media go-alongs allowed me to ask participants questions about their motivations for action in the moments that they occurred. They were also useful when the talk aloud protocol stalled, allowing me to challenge participants to link their practices to their expectations of how the platform would respond to their input.

Media go-along tours were conducted during each interview after the initial semi-structured interview questions and screenshot reviews had concluded. I invited participants to start by opening any platform they wished, and to stay and browse for as long as they normally would. This contributed to the varying lengths of interviews: some participants were only active on two or three platforms, while others were active on up to six. Some spent long periods of time on platforms with ‘endless scroll’ content discoverability—such as that found on TikTok’s ‘for you’ page and Instagram’s ‘explore’ page—while others only stayed for a few minutes. While I asked participants to narrate their actions and motivations, compliance with this varied and they generally required frequent reminders. Where appropriate, I interrupted with questions about actions observed. I also frequently narrated my own observations as a means of creating informal field notes in the audio transcript and because written field notation was difficult to manage simultaneously with the media go-alongs.

4.2.2.6 Screenshots as private archive

To support the interviews and media go-alongs, participants were invited to take screenshots of news and cultural commentary content they saw on social media in between interviews. This form of solicited private archive (Lune & Berg, 2017, pp. 152–154) was used as a form of photo-elicitation, a data collection method that “asks research participants to take photographs which are then discussed in an interview with the researcher; the data generated in this case consists of both the photographs and the interview” (Rose, 2016, p. 308). This method was selected in part to act as a media diary (Lune & Berg, 2017) that could mitigate issues related to the gap of time between interviews with participants, given that the news cycle moves quickly, and memory alone can be unreliable. It also provides a means by which to encourage involvement and participation in the research project overall (Pain, 2012), as evidenced by the enthusiasm some participants had for this method.

Taking screenshots of news related content seen on social media in between interviews was an optional activity for participants, as articulated in the PIS and during each interview. Participants were reminded to redact any information within the screenshot that could personally identify a 3rd party user within their network such as a username, profile picture or other image, location, or logo. Where the screenshot featured content from a brand, business, or public figure such as a celebrity, influencer, or politician, the redaction requirement was relaxed so long as the content was publicly available and the redaction would have required the entire screenshot to be obscured.

At the beginning of interviews two through five, I invited participants to share any screenshots they had taken—this helped facilitate discussion of what news related content they had seen on different platforms. Most participants had engaged in screenshot taking, although a small number declined to share these on screen with me, preferring to use these as

a personal memory aid alone, and instead describing the content to me and how they had come across it. The majority shared images on screen during the interviews, but of these only a small number consented to sharing these images by file transfer. In these instances, participants were given a link to OneDrive where they could upload any redacted files. Although only three participants shared screenshots via file share, over 1650 files were shared with me. This is mostly thanks to one enthusiastic participant who was not only diligent in their screenshot taking, but also volunteered to continue sharing screenshots for an additional ten weeks after their final interview. However, as will be discussed in section 4.3 below, these images were not used for the qualitative data analysis.

4.2.2.7 Thematic content analysis

A key aim of this thesis is to examine the effect that consumptive curation practices have on the amount of news related content users see on social media platforms. For this purpose, a content analysis was completed to compare the news related content seen by participants in the study and the news stories being reported in professional media at the time to determine if participants were exposed to trending news topics, even from social media posts that did not include any professional news media source content. Quantitative methods such as content analysis allow "researchers to conduct simple to extremely sophisticated statistical analyses" such as those that "show relationships among the data" (Stoudt, 2014, p. 670). McMillan describes content analysis within the context of content found on the Internet "as a microscope that brings communication messages into focus" (2000, p. 80). A more traditional definition describes it as "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 182). I selected this method as a means of validating findings from

remote observation, interview, media go-alongs, and screenshots related to news media exposure after curation practices were accounted for.

The thematic content analysis was the final method used to analyse the data collected during the study as it relied on the initial coding of recorded transcripts from the interview and media go-alongs, along with coding of field notes from the remote observations. Specifically, I conducted a thematic analysis of this data to first identify patterns of news topics that participants saw discussed on social media, and to then compare these with news topics reported in the mainstream media at the same time. Once the interview transcripts were coded, I used the Internet Archive's *WayBack Machine*¹⁵ for the first pass to verify the daily content on the front page of the Australian edition of *The Guardian* news website¹⁶ against topics reported by participants during the study. I selected *The Guardian* as it was frequently mentioned by the participants, has an Australian newsroom, and provides good coverage of both national and international news events. As participants were frequently exposed to news topics that would fall under a 'long tail' of interest (Anderson, 2004), in cases where a news topic was mentioned by a participant but there was no corresponding news story in *The Guardian*, I cast a wider net through the use of *Google Search*¹⁷ filtered by 'news' and 'date range' to verify whether other legacy or industry specific news media organisations had reported on the topic during the relevant dates.

4.3 Data analysis

For the data analysis, I took a grounded theory approach, which also informed the design of the data collection methods, as described above. Grounded theory is a useful approach to data

¹⁵ web.archive.org

¹⁶ www.theguardian.com/au

¹⁷ www.google.com.au

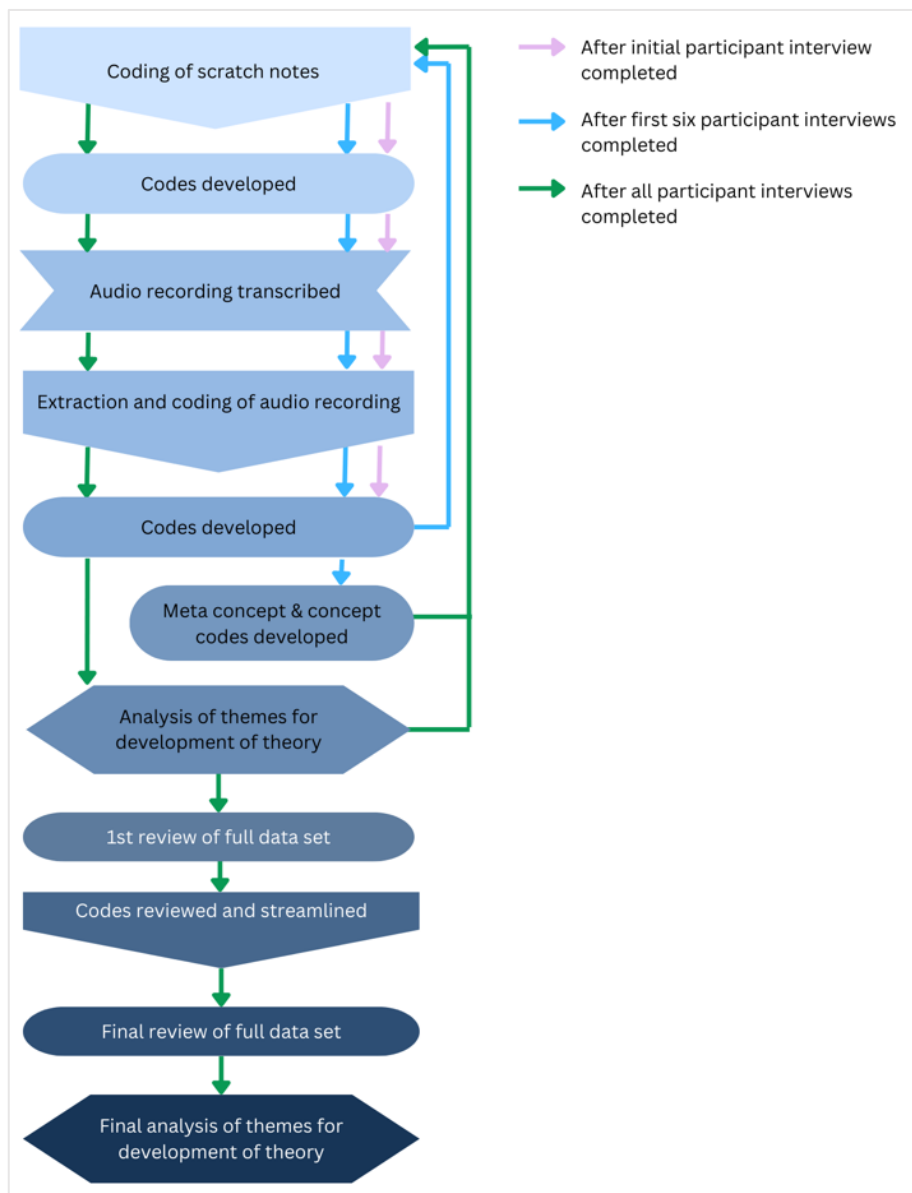
analysis where the inquiry does not have a specific outcome to test or prove, and “is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273).

Grounded theory was also an appropriate approach for the analysis of data collected in this study as it is founded in a naturalistic approach to conducting research, focuses on the actions and processes that occur in various settings, and takes the position that these actions and processes are always in flux (Charmaz, 2015). This digital ethnography represents a moment in time study on social platforms that are themselves in a constant state of flux, as were the motivations and experiences of participants, which makes grounded theory the most suitable approach to uncovering emergent themes in the practices and content experiences within this context.

4.3.1 Open coding and analysis of digital ethnography data

In this section, I describe the open coding process and thematic analysis of the participant data collected. A flow chart of this process is provided in Figure **4-3**: .

Figure 4-3: Process Flow Chart of Open Coding of Participant Data



Thematic analysis is a well-regarded approach in media studies for obtaining inductive findings from interview material (Herzog et al., 2019). Data analyses to establish themes began after the first interview was conducted. As a first step, I coded the scratch notes¹⁸ I had

¹⁸ A note on scratch notes taken during the data collection processes of the interview and media go-alongs: Scratch notes are short notes taken during or shortly after fieldwork observations that are later expanded into fieldnotes (Arora & Bulp, 2017). Due to the pace with which participants scrolled through their social media feeds and screenshots, and my responsibilities as an attentive interviewer, it was not always possible to capture specifics about the news related content seen. Details such as the platform it was seen on, where the source content came from, or who had shared the content on social media were at times missed as a result.

taken during the interviews and media go-alongs for overall themes; for practices, affordances, and motivations, the primary codes came from this initial interview. Next, I uploaded audio that was recorded during the interview¹⁹ to the speech-to-text platform Otter²⁰ for review. I checked each transcript and made corrections where needed, creating a textual record of the interview as well as providing my first revisit of the interview data. As a next step, I extracted comments made in the interview from the transcript and entered them into Microsoft Excel, then coded these under the general themes identified in the scratch notes, adding a participant identifier, interview date, timestamp for the extracted comment, as well as additional context fields to identify the social media platform referenced, as well as any other contextual cues and signifiers. I also added data from the scratch notes to the appropriate context fields at this time.

This process was repeated for the first six interviews conducted, creating a small corpus of coded data. At this point, I conducted a review of the coded data for emergent themes, and checked for consistency in what was extracted as being relevant. As a result of this review, new fields were identified as being relevant to the coding process—for example, source content and how the participant had been exposed to the source content—which required all the interviews to be re-visited to complete all coded data. After this review, I established that comments could be categorised into one of three primary ‘meta concepts’: practices, news, and observations of use, which I added as the primary filter for all comments that were coded. I then added a secondary code field of ‘concept’ to act as the main conceptual idea that the comment related to within each of the three meta concepts identified.

¹⁹ As the semi-structured interviews and media go-alongs were conducted at the same meeting, and both methods involve questioning of the participant, they will hereafter both be referred to as ‘the interview’.

²⁰ www.otter.ai

This allowed me to quantify some of the comments made in the interviews and media go-alongs that could support the findings presented and discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

As new participants were recruited into the project at different times, the remaining interviews followed a process of coding scratch notes, cleaning the transcript, extracting relevant comments, and coding these comments as they occurred. This allowed me to analyse themes and develop my conceptual theories concurrently with data collection; however, it also presented a challenge in that I had missed relevant comments in the earlier coded interviews. After all the interviews had been conducted, and when the first six participant interviews had been coded (for a total of $n=30$ interviews), I restarted the coding process to ensure consistency across all interviews, which resulted in further additions to the coded data.

At the completion of the coding process for all interviews ($n=65$), I conducted another review to ensure consistency amongst the comments extracted and coding fields applied. At the same time, I streamlined the context codes, including the secondary ‘concept’ codes to allow for emergent themes to be quickly identified in the data. This process resulted in a final table with $n=1797$ lines of coded data for analysis.

I conducted a final overall review of the data to ensure consistency of coding fields applied, as well as to add a new context code relevant to the curation concepts discussed in Chapter 5. For future ease of comment retrieval from the large data set, I colour coded and added an additional field to the data for specific comments that were pertinent to my emerging curatorial theory that might be used to illustrate examples in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In summary, I used this coding approach to analyse the data set for emergent themes and concepts around curation practices and algorithmic literacy that informed the theory presented in Chapter 5 of this thesis. I also analysed the data for the emergent themes and concepts relating to news content on social media platforms presented in Chapter 6. These

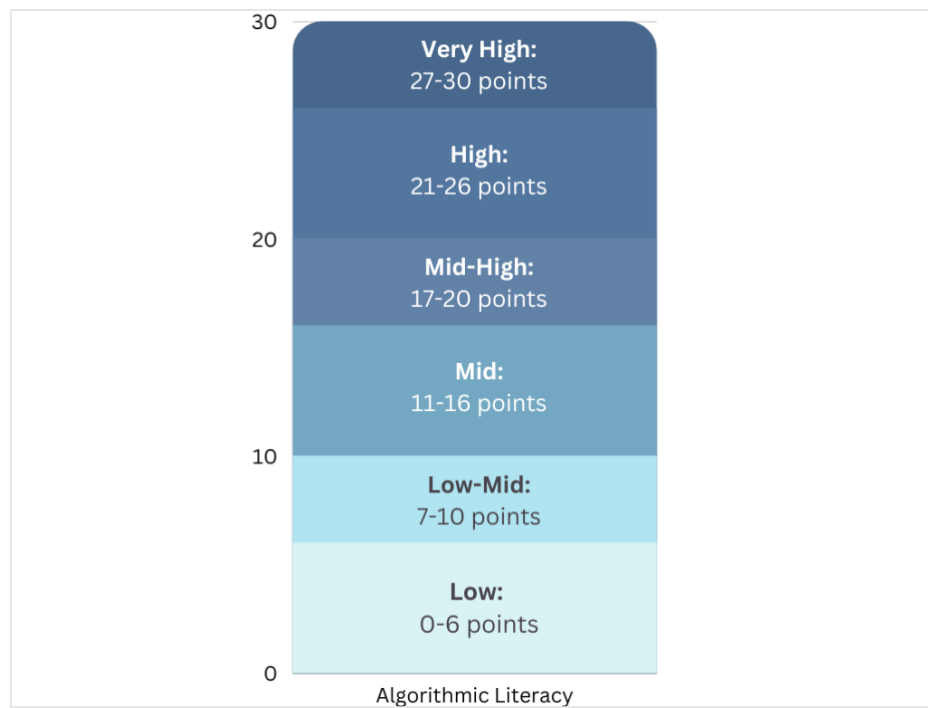
themes and concepts were integral to establishing the baseline for the content analysis, which began at the completion of this analysis phase.

4.3.2 Evaluation of participant algorithmic literacy

One of the emergent themes from the open coding process described above was the algorithmic literacy that participants were demonstrating and discussing during the interviews and media go-alongs. To establish if there was a link between the curation practices observed and a participant's understanding of algorithmic processes, I ranked each participant against the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness (AMCA) Scale (Zarouali et al., 2021). As algorithmic literacy was a theme that emerged some way into the data collection, and after some participants had already exited the data collection cycle, I was unable to develop and administer a survey or questionnaire instrument with which to assess each participant's algorithmic awareness. Instead, I relied on observed examples captured in the coded data described above to identify evidence of algorithmic awareness according to the scale.

I started by assigning a point scale to each of the five dimensions of the AMCA-scale: a) content filtering, b) automated decision-making, c) human-algorithm interplay, d) algorithmic persuasion, and e) ethical considerations. The point scale ran from 0 to 6 for each dimension, where 0 indicated no evidence of awareness, 1-2 low, 3-4 mid, and 5-6 high awareness. This resulted in a possible point range of 30, which I translated into the algorithmic literacy levels illustrated in Figure 4-4.

Figure 4-4: Algorithmic Literacy Level Groupings Based on the AMCA-scale



I then reviewed the coded data for relevant examples of these dimensions from each participant, arriving at the determinations in Figure 4 5 below.

Figure 4-5: Algorithmic Literacy Level of Participants against Adapted AMCA-scale



As this figure demonstrates, none of the participants showed evidence of low algorithmic literacy against the AMCA-scale, with almost half ($n=6$) in the high or very high grouping. However, it should be noted that as this theme emerged during data collection, I did not amend my interviewing technique to elicit evidence of algorithmic literacy against the AMCA-scale, so as to remain consistent across all participants. As such, the algorithmic literacy level I have determined for each participant may not be a true reflection of their actual algorithmic literacy level and it is intended as a general indication only of observed algorithmic awareness in each participant. Pre and post data collection assessment of each participant with a consistent instrument would have provided more reliable results.

4.3.3 Comparative content analysis

The final phase of my data analysis was the content analysis of news and cultural commentary topics. I followed a modified form of a traditional procedure for content analysis of 1) hypothesis/question formulation, 2) sample selection, 3) definition of coding categories, 4) coding of content, and 5) analysis of coded data (McMillan, 2000). I eliminated the traditional step requiring that all coders be trained since I was working alone with relatively straightforward data sets for casual comparison.

Firstly, I established the hypothesis that: “Topics that participants identified as news related on social media would be concurrently reported in the mainstream media”. To ensure this hypothesis was tested, I decided on a thematic analysis of content, whereby both direct reference to trending news stories as well as reference to the conceptual ideas behind these news stories was sought in both the participant data as well as in the data taken from *The Guardian* during the same period. For example, where a participant reported that they had seen a post commenting on racism as a social issue since the last interview but did not

reference a specific incident or news story, racism was identified as a conceptual theme for comparative analysis.

Next, I compiled the relevant sample datasets from the two sources: participants and *The Guardian* online. The first set was extracted from the coded interview transcripts described above. I filtered the coded data for mentions of news related topics and themes reported by the participants, then assigned these mentions the relevant date that the content was seen on social media, as well as which participant had mentioned the topic. In the case of topics observed and discussed in media go-alongs, the date of the interview was used. For screenshots referenced by participants that were taken between interviews, and where a specific date was not possible to ascertain from either the audio, scratch notes, or shared screenshots, a retrospective date range from the previous interview to the date of the screenshot discussion was used.

The news in 2021 and early 2022 was dominated by Covid-19 related reporting, especially movement restrictions, lockdowns, and vaccinations. As the majority of the participants in the study resided in Sydney, NSW, which experienced a number of lockdowns (including a four-month lockdown from 26th June to October 11th 2021) accompanied by various movement restrictions that were in place throughout the year, a number of participants commented that they were using social media more frequently than they normally would during these times.

Table **4-3** shows a select number of news topics and themes that participants frequently saw shared or discussed on social media during the data collection period. It must be stressed that this is not a quantitative representation of news and cultural commentary seen by participants because a tally of exactly how much news and cultural commentary was seen

was beyond the scope of this research project. Rather, this table is intended to provide context to the thematic analysis and the quotes used to illustrate concepts in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Table 4-3: Common News Topics Seen by Participants on Social Media

Topic
Covid
Australian politics
US politics
Sports news
Sexual violence
Olympics
Racism
LGBTQIA+ issues
Afghanistan
Local community news
Long tail news/interests
Environmental news
Palestine
Entertainment news
Technology news

The next sample dataset was taken from the news stories included on the front page of *The Guardian* (retrieved via the *Wayback Machine* on the relevant date or date range) or other credible news source, as described in section 4.2.2.7 above.

Next, I established coding categories through a review of the themes and concepts of news related content reported by participants. For example, throughout the data collection period there was constant reporting of news related discussion on the theme of sexual violence against women. This included direct references to news stories on specific cases of sexual violence, as well as more general discussions around sexual violence at the same times.

I then coded content from both samples. Finally, the coded content was compared and analysed to establish which themes were either synchronously or asynchronously being discussed on social media and reported in the mainstream news, which themes were synchronously or asynchronously being discussed by niche or industry specific news media, and which themes were discussed on social media independently of news media reporting. This analysis was then fed back into the overall portrait of each participant's experiences with news related content on social media, contributing further to the formation of theory around consumptive curation presented in Chapter 5, as well as the theory around news related content on social media platforms discussed at length in Chapter 6.

4.4 Limitations

This research methodology has several limitations that extend beyond the ethical issues raised earlier in this chapter, and beyond the convenience sample used for data collection, as discussed in the following sections.

4.4.1 Participant sample size and homogeneity

Firstly, the cohort of participants in this research project all displayed mid to high levels of algorithmic literacy; that is, they frequently made connections between their own decisions and actions on social media platforms and the content they saw. This was not by design. As discussed in section 4.2.1.2 above, a convenience sample approach was taken, resulting in a relatively homogenous cohort of participants. As such, the observation that more active curation practices were enacted by participants with higher levels of algorithmic literacy is based on a sample group whose least algorithmically literate participant was still moderately literate. As such, this thesis is unable to identify a baseline for where a relationship between algorithmic literacy and active curation practices begins to develop. Given the ubiquity of

algorithmic systems in our society (Willson, 2017), and the young age at which many individuals are first exposed to recommender algorithms, establishing a baseline may prove to be an insurmountable challenge. However, replicating the study with a cohort of users exhibiting lower levels of algorithmic literacy may provide insight into how and when active curation practices are developed.

The higher level of algorithmic literacy seen in participants in this research project can be attributed to other characteristics that they held in common. Of the 13 participants in this study ($n=13$), 11 were from the greater Sydney Metropolitan area ($n=11$), 11 identified as female ($n=11$), ten had completed tertiary education ($n=10$), and more than half ($n=7$) were 25 years of age or younger. All 13 participants had either completed, were in the process of completing, or about to start university, with almost half ($n=6$) holding or completing a postgraduate degree during data collection. Although I did not ask participants about their household income, education levels, as well as the occupations participants disclosed during the interviews, are good indicators of mid to high socioeconomic status for the group as a whole. Socioeconomic status is linked to digital inclusivity (Thomas et al., 2021), with many individuals with lower status experiencing limited access to online spaces due to issues related to device and Internet access affordability and availability in their area. As discussed by Cotter and Reisdorf (2020), the ability to develop algorithmic literacy is tied to exposure to and experience of algorithmic processing, meaning individuals with more restricted access to digital devices and online technologies will also develop algorithmic literacy skills at a slower pace than others with personal devices and on demand connectivity. Therefore, the findings in this thesis cannot be extrapolated to the general population of emerging news consumers in Australia until further research with this specific demographic can be conducted and analysed.

4.4.2 Western centric social media focus

One limitation to my convenience sample—beyond the homogeneity of participant demographics discussed previously—is that the social media platforms featured in this study are all popular in Australia, and also represent the most popular social media platforms in other Western cultures that dominate scholarly works. This contributes to dominant presentations of Western-centric views of practices and experiences with news media (Davis & Xiao, 2021). Replication of the methods presented here with different cohorts, in different geographic locations and in diverse cultural contexts, where non-Western social media platforms are used, would be beneficial for the de-centring of Westernised concepts of social media use and practices in scholarly research.

4.4.3 Researching during a global pandemic

Another limitation of the data collection process for this thesis is the timing of the project. Although I started work towards this thesis shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic began, the data collection period occurred during the second year of this global crisis. In Sydney, where the majority of research participants resided at the time, the year was punctuated by frequent changes in movement restrictions, including a four-month period of lockdown, as well as the introduction of vaccines in Australia. With constantly changing and evolving rules around movement and vaccine eligibility, many Australians turned to the news and to social media for more information about these changes, as well as to share their thoughts and feelings on how the pandemic was evolving and being managed by federal and state politicians. This represented a large shift in the norms of social media use and news seeking behaviour in Australia, as evidenced by the local edition of the annual Reuters Digital News Report (Park et al., 2022). However, as participants were recruited on a rolling basis, the degree of restrictions experienced differed from person to person throughout the data collection period.

This periodisation limited generalisability of the findings that could be drawn from the data collected in this study as it reflects the practices and experiences of social media users at a time when their movements were restricted, and their personal interest in news may have been heightened by the ongoing pandemic.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the plan of inquiry used to address this study's central research questions. I have described the suitability of the digital ethnographic approach I took to data collection and explained how I developed an ethical approach to the direct observation of real-world social media use. The media go-alongs and screenshot as private archive methods of data collection were particularly fruitful for uncovering the extent to which news and cultural commentary content was made visible on each participant's social feeds, and together these provided a more reliable account of the participant's practices than would be offered by self-reporting methods.

I also described the process of conducting 65 interviews and media go-alongs with participants recruited through social media and the University's research volunteer web portal. I then presented an overview of my approach to data analysis through a grounded theory approach. The thick data collected and analysed resulted in two significant themes emerging: the algorithmic literacy of everyday users in relation to the curatorial actions they engage in, and the role that non-journalistic content and sources play in developing the ambient news environment of social media platforms. The analysis led to the development of concepts in curation practices and experiences with news media content on social media platforms that are discussed in the following chapters.

In this chapter, I have paid particular attention to a number of ethical issues that were raised through the selection of data collection methods that could deter researchers from engaging in direct observation of social media content. While each method used in this thesis was selected for its ability to provide thick, reliable data that avoids many of the pitfalls of self-reporting, there were also challenges to be dealt with in regard to the contextual integrity of 3rd party users whose content it would have been onerous to exclude from observation and whose informed consent would be extremely difficult to secure in this context. Through the plan of inquiry outlined in this chapter, I was able to successfully extract relevant data about participants' practices in real world contexts without unduly exposing non-consenting 3rd parties and their data to the collection and analysis processes. I was also able to protect the anonymity of the consenting participants who contributed thick data for analysis which formed the basis of the emerging themes of active and passive curation. I also presented an argument for the inclusion of non-journalistic content in the study of news on social media platforms, as discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 5: Active and passive curation practices

5.1 Introduction

Although the role of curatorial practices on social media has drawn some scholarly attention (see Chapters 2 and 3 for discussion), a thorough study of these practices and the motivations behind their use has not yet been presented. This chapter examines the ways in which the participants in this research project actively curated their social media feeds through strategic interaction with social media platform affordances. It also investigates how the participants perceived the effectiveness of these practices in influencing what they see on their social feeds and explores their understanding of the consumptive curation occurring through normal interaction with platform affordances.

By analysing data from the interviews and media go-alongs, I found that many users are not only algorithmically literate but also that they *actively* curate their social media feeds to influence what the algorithmically driven recommender systems show them. I refer to this purposeful agency as ‘active curation’, which contrasts with the everyday ‘passive curation’ that occurs as a result of a user’s typical social media use.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Davis (2017) conceptualises digital curation as a theory of attention, where the act of deciding what to include in—or exclude from—digital spaces like social media platforms is regulated by both the end user and the platform algorithm. In social media spaces, everyday users engage in productive curation through practices of sharing content or information to reflect how they wish to represent themselves in these online spaces and how they hope to acquire the attention of other users (Davis, 2017). This type of curation is generally within the control of the everyday user, with the notable exception of information that must be shared with a platform to open an account although in many cases the user is still

able to control how much of this information appears publicly. Platforms afford less individual control over the consumptive curation of the content that everyday users see on their social feeds (Davis, 2017) and limit content visibility through recommender algorithm systems. This chapter presents a taxonomy of user-led consumptive curation as this reveals the scope of a user's capacity to have greater influence over what appears in their feeds. By inviting certain types of content into their feed and dissuading others from appearing, a user can enact agency over the personalisation of their social feed, actively pushing back against algorithmic recommendation.

The chapter begins with an overview of participant personas that provides context to the curatorial practices observed during the data collection phase. It then presents a brief exploration of the relationship between algorithmic literacy and consumptive curation, showing how varying degrees of literacy can affect an individual's understanding of how their practices affect personalisation, their desire to curate social feeds, and the range of curation techniques that are enacted. Next it introduces the concept of active and passive curation as a lens through which to examine the social media practices of everyday users, before moving on to presenting a catalogue of consumptive curatorial practices observed during the media go-alongs and semi structured interviews. These practices are discussed with respect to the degree to which they were actively engaged in by the participants, and the ways in which they were conceptualised by individual participants as a response to algorithmic recommender systems. The chapter concludes by relating these practices to algorithmic literacy to highlight how curatorial actions are developed through personal experiences with platform algorithm recommender systems.

5.2 Participant personas

As noted in Chapter 4, the cohort of participants in this research study were a relatively homogenous group in regard to demographic information such as location, gender, and education level. An overview of participant personas—which were taken from the interviews and media go-alongs—is provided here to contextualise the quotes presented in the sections below. These quotes illustrate the participants’ motivation for using social media, their interest in news media, and their level of algorithmic literacy, assessed against the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness (AMCA) scale (discussed in Chapter 4).

As noted earlier, the participant aliases used for direct quotes have randomly been reassigned at times to further protect participant anonymity.

Olivia: 18 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Mid-level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Olivia has finished high school and has been accepted into the course she wanted to enter at university but has decided to take a gap year before commencing her studies. She enjoys many crafts and hobbies, including sports and creative arts, and primarily uses social media to locate content related to these activities as well as to keep-up-to-date with friends. She frequently shares content with friends and family via in-app direct message. She prefers to maintain multiple accounts on her favourite platform so that her different interests and hobbies might one day grow into professional accounts. She is self-described news avoidant on social media.

Chloe: 20 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Mid-high level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Chloe has just finished a bachelor’s degree and is now looking for work within her field of

study. She is interested in fitness content, as well as content from brands that she is interested in. She is especially fond of funny animal videos and memes in general, which she frequently shares with friends and family on social media. She is self-described news avoidant on social media but does watch the news on TV.

Joshua: 22 years old, he/him. Greater Sydney area. High level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Joshua is an Indigenous Australian university student, currently completing a bachelor's degree where he is very active within the university's student body. He is extremely politically engaged, especially with social justice issues, and identifies as LGBTQIA+. He is trying to align his social media accounts to these interests so that he can learn more about issues affecting people from their own perspective. He uses social media to stay in touch with family and friends, as well as to organise social events both privately and for the student associations he is active in. He actively seeks out news through his social media accounts—both national and international—and follows politicians and political parties.

Jessica: 24 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Mid level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Jessica works in the field that she studied at university, which she very much enjoys and is very passionate about. She enjoys spending time with her friends, as well as trying new activities and hobbies. She uses social media as a way of keeping up with friends and family, and learning about emerging social issues. She is not particularly interested in news on social media but is also not trying to avoid it. Instead, she seeks out funny content as a means of entertainment and passing time.

Sarah: 24 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. High level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Sarah works in the field she studied at university, and also helps out at her family's local restaurant. She loves pop culture and food, with much of her social media activity centred on these two topics. She likes to stay informed, and will seek out and follow new, diverse news media accounts if she feels she is not seeing enough on social media. She is concerned about the abuse that can come with being active on social media, and maintains both a public and a private account on her favourite platform to manage her experiences.

Georgia: 24 years old, she/her. Greater Adelaide area. High level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Georgia is studying a post graduate degree at university, studying full time. She is a fan of Aussie Rules football (AFL) and follows both the women's and men's league on social media. She is highly engaged with the news on social media, following national, regional, and local accounts across various platforms to stay up-to-date with current events. She is also fond of popular culture, especially music, and uses her social media accounts to stay up-to-date with new music releases. She is distrustful of social media platforms' management of her data and privacy, and is a self-described 'lurker' on social media.

Lauren: 25 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Mid-high level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Lauren works in the field that she studied at university and loves her job. However, her high-profile job makes her feel vulnerable on social media platforms so she has locked all of her accounts to private. She likes to follow influencers who also have a social conscience, matching fashion and beauty to feminism and women's issues. She is also very interested in hyper-local news, following specific accounts that cover current issues that directly affect her.

Alex: 26 years old, they/their. Greater Sydney area. Very high level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Alex is currently studying a postgraduate degree at university full time but is still heavily involved in their industry. They are very interested in following industry news, as well as pop culture and content relating to their home country. They are active on their social media accounts, keeping up with trending topics and news, nationally and internationally. They are very distrustful of platforms owned by Meta due to the way they manage personal information so do not have accounts for these popular platforms.

Stephanie: 26 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Low-mid level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Stephanie is also currently studying a postgraduate degree at university, which takes up much of her time. Several years ago, she noticed just how much time she was wasting on social media platforms, and how negatively the content was impacting her mental health, so she decided to take a break from social media. A year later she realised she was much happier without the negative content and constant availability to others but missed staying up-to-date with current events and trending topics through social posts. She now only uses social media without signing into an account—which many platforms allow—however, she is severely limited in what she can see and do on these platforms.

Samantha: 27 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. High level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Samantha is also studying a postgraduate degree at university, and works casually alongside her studies. She really enjoys using social media but is a self-described ‘lurker’ on the platforms that she uses, rarely uploading her own content or commenting on what other accounts share. She uses social media for both entertainment and to keep up-to-date with

current events, and follows journalists, activists, and news media accounts. She is particularly interested in feminism and women's issues, and takes issue with how she is targeted by personalised ads on the platforms she uses.

Emma: 29 years old, she/her. Greater Newcastle area. Very high level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Emma is currently studying for a bachelor's degree at university, hoping to make a career change once she graduates. She is a very active social media user, and has been taking steps to professionalise some of her Instagram accounts to support her artistic works. As such, she has very high algorithmic literacy, learning about platform algorithms from experience as well as other artists she has connected with on Instagram in an attempt to "play the visibility game" (Cotter, 2019). She is also very engaged with current affairs and politics on social media, with a particular interest in social justice, feminism, and women's issues.

Rebecca: 30 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Low-mid level of algorithmic literacy, mid to high level of digital literacy.

Rebecca has nearly completed a postgraduate degree at university, which she hopes will help her get into the career she wants within the public sector. She uses social media to stay connected to people she has met through her extensive travels internationally, as well as with family and friends, and to take inspiration from successful businesspeople and public figures. Although she is a heavy user of social media, she had not really thought about what the algorithm was doing until she joined the study. She is a self-described 'lurker', preferring to consume content rather than create it. She is also concerned about the effect social media content can have on people's mental health.

Amy: 30 years old, she/her. Greater Sydney area. Mid-level of algorithmic literacy, high level of digital literacy.

Amy is working within the area she studied at university, and after many years with the same employer is actively looking for a change to another company. As such, she spends a lot more time on LinkedIn than she used to, but she sees this more as work than social media.

Elsewhere, she clearly distinguishes the social platforms that she uses by the type of content she is hoping to see, using Facebook to stay in contact with friends and family, as well as for random news updates. She uses Instagram for inspiration and ideas for her interest in literature and food. She follows restaurants, cafés, and recipe accounts as well as ‘bookstagram’ and bookstores for reading recommendations. She prefers not to get her news from social media but still follows several news media accounts.

5.3 Algorithmic and digital literacy’s effect on curation practices

In section 5.2 above, I indicated the level of algorithmic literacy that each participant persona appeared to possess. These designations were based on observations taken during interviews and media go-alongs—where each participant demonstrated their use of social media—which were then mapped to the AMCA-scale developed by Zarouali et al. (2021), the process of which was outlined in more detail in Chapter 4.

Based on my observations, each participant demonstrated mid to high levels of algorithmic literacy according to the AMCA-scale; however, this scale is limited in that it does not link algorithmic literacy to digital literacy. While there are several digital literacy scales available, such as the digital ability index used in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) (Thomas et al., 2021), these tend to focus on general statements about a user’s capacity to operate and navigate technology and applications rather than specifics as to what that operational knowledge might mean for their use of specific platforms or devices, or how their use of affordances may impact algorithmic processes. By the ADII measure, each participant in this study displayed extremely advanced digital ability although this did not

necessarily mean that they had an advanced digital ability to understand the relationship between their platform actions and how these affected algorithmic recommendations. Therefore, the above designations of digital literacy were interpreted as the extent to which the participant was familiar with the interface and affordances available on each platform, as demonstrated throughout the interviews and media go-alongs.

The data presented in this chapter suggests that a combination of increased algorithmic and digital literacy leads users to engage in more active curation practices: the more a participant understands algorithmic processing, and the more platform and device affordances they are familiar with, the more curation practices they will actively engage in so as to attempt to influence their social feed. The concept of active and passive curation is introduced and discussed in the following section.

5.4 Active and passive curation: Agency enacted within the context of algorithmic recommender systems

This chapter provides a taxonomy that divides curation into practices that act to either invite or dissuade specific content into the social feed, which are then further categorised as either active or passive curation practices. The conceptualisation of active and passive curation that will be presented here is specific to social media platforms where algorithmic recommender systems are present.

The algorithmic recommender systems on social media platforms are systems of machine learning, where the system responds to, and adjusts output based on, the inputs or ‘data points’ received (Jordan & Mitchell, 2015). From a social media consumptive curation perspective, the process of machine learning begins to take effect once a user starts to use the platform regularly. Take as an example a new social media account: if a user initially signals

an interest in art when creating their account, art related content might be prioritised in the social feed by the algorithmic recommender. However, if the user then starts interacting with the sporting content shared by friends, or by searching for it directly on the platform, the recommender will increasingly incorporate sporting content into their social feed. As such, curation moves from an initial user-led decision regarding what to include or exclude towards regular human and algorithmic activity, and outcomes, on the social media platform. Every time a user interacts with an affordance on the platform, a new data point is generated. This data input is then processed by the algorithm and the new input is incorporated into the platform's profile of the user, thereby influencing which items of content will be shown or hidden from them in future. The machine learning taking place is ongoing and self-referential, with data points created each time a user interacts with a platform's affordances.

Increasingly, users are becoming more aware of this algorithmic process through their experiences of using these platforms, as well as through conversations with other platform users, and as a consequence develop their algorithmic literacy (Cotter, 2022; Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Thorson et al., 2021). Data from this research project suggests a link between algorithmic literacy and active curation practices; that is, the more a user understands how recommender algorithm logics are predicated on their own interactions and activity, the more likely they are to consciously engage in curation practices that might steer the recommender systems in the direction they are wanting. They do this by either inviting more content into the social feed with signals they believe indicate interest in a topic, or by dissuading specific content through available affordances and practical behaviours. This interaction can be framed as a conversation between what the user wants to see and what the algorithm thinks they should see. This conversation analogy is also relevant to the personification of the algorithm that many participants in the cohort mentioned during their interviews and media go-alongs. For instance, participants reported “telling” or “teaching” the algorithm what kind

of content they wanted to see and commented that “it knows” or “it has figured out” what they like, or how “it must be” tracking their offline activity. This personification of the algorithm highlights not only users’ awareness of the algorithmic processing on these platforms but also how users expect this algorithmic mediation to occur, and whether or not they thought their actions were successful in influencing their social feed:

The algorithm is not fun today. It’s not showing me any cats. - Olivia

I don’t think I would use it in a special way. I’ll go wherever the algorithm takes me. -

Amy

But usually the Instagram algorithm has figured out whose stories I like to view or not, and they usually come up first anyway. - Georgia

What’s with all of the gym videos? What message are you trying to send me TikTok? -

Samantha

Facebook knows that I travel, have interest in things like that. - Alex

Many of the participants were often unaware of the influence that their practices had on their social feed until after the fact, at times being presented with content they did not want to have included in the future (discussed further in various examples presented in section 5.5.2.2 below). However, this delayed connection to the effects of their curation practices can be framed as part of the participant's ongoing learning of recommender algorithms as experience technologies (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020).

In the next section, I catalogue the range of consumptive curatorial practices observed during the media go-alongs with the research participants. This taxonomy can provide a lexicon for future discussions of everyday user curation practices across various proprietary

social media platforms. It demonstrates that the practices of everyday users go beyond traditional notions of curation as “the production, selection, filtering, annotation or framing of content” (Davis, 2017, p. 1018) typically associated with the initiation of a program or project (such as the initial set up of a social media account or presence), extending curation to the everyday consumption practice that users engage in every time they are active on these platforms.

While all of the practices listed below form part of everyday social media usage, they also create data points for platform algorithms to make personalised recommendations from, effectively curating the social feed. During the data collection period, participants discussed their motivation for engaging in these practices. At times, their motivations aligned with the primary function of the affordance, such as clicking a ‘like’ button to show their friend that they enjoyed the content they were sharing. At other times, they were motivated to act due to their awareness of algorithmic recommender systems determining what content was presented to them on their personalised social feed, such as clicking ‘like’ to encourage the algorithm to prioritise content from that account, or content similar to it. Participants demonstrated that they were aware that this kind of conscious shaping of the social feed required constant, repeated, ongoing, and active attention when on social media.

I have termed these practices ‘active curation’, with the adjective active denoting that these practices are “characterized by busy or lively activity; engaging or ready to engage in physically energetic pursuits; alert, lively; busy” (Oxford, 2012a, p. 4. a). This term also serves to distinguish these practices from passive activity on social media that may also give shape to personalised feeds. Active curation practices are therefore characterised by the user’s engagement of them to specifically influence the personalised social feed. When these

practices are not consciously engaged for curation purposes, they are categorised as ‘passive curation’ practices because they still impact recommender processes on these platforms.

All users—including everyday users and content creators—can engaged in these practices actively or passively. While these two groups differ from each other in their primary motivation for engaging in various practices, the net effect of both active and passive curation is the same for both: the user’s practices contribute to both knowledge-based and collaborative-based filtering of content on algorithmically mediated social media platforms. Active curation is a means by which the user is able to enact agency in their social media experiences, and this term refers to instances where users take specific action because they believe it will “tell” the algorithm what their interest in the content is, and this will result in either more or less content like it to be shown on the social feed in the future. For example, a user may click ‘like’ on an Instagram post specifically because they enjoyed the content and want the creator to know this (passive curation) and/or because they believe clicking ‘like’ will also “tell” the algorithm that they want to see more content like it or from the same account (active curation). Put another way, swiping through the TikTok ‘For You’ page is a practice afforded by the platform’s interface and is primarily used for content discovery, even though the length of time spent watching a video will create a data point for the platform’s profile of the user, influencing which videos will be shown on the ‘For You’ page in future. If a user is unaware of this logic, the practice of swiping through content and allocating attention to it (or not) merely passively curates their future social feed. On the other hand, if the user is aware of this relationship, they might adjust their attention allocation or engage in other practices to curate the future social feed more actively.

This chapter focuses on active curation practices on social media platforms as a response to users’ increased algorithmic literacy and their desire to exert agency over their

social media experiences. The practice of active curation is also necessitated by the frequent changes and updates made to platform algorithms by platform owners, which at times changes not only what is seen on the social feed but also the practices that are engaged to try and influence them.

In the next section, I have catalogued the practices that are common across the cohort of participants as well as the social media platforms observed. This taxonomy aims to highlight both the similarities and the ubiquitousness of consumptive curatorial practices that are engaged in by everyday users through normal interaction with platform affordances, to identify which practices form part of conscious active or reflexive passive curation, as well as to draw attention to the motivations and user expectations behind these practices. Through the development of this taxonomy of practices, I have also established a lexicon for discussing curatorial practices.

5.5 Curation practices: A taxonomy

As discussed in Chapter 3, there can be a danger of reducing practices to a simple description of what they are without questioning the contexts within which the practices arise, or their significance to the person enacting them. Nonetheless, description is needed to both establish a starting point for analysis as well as to provide a common language for discussion. While many of the practices outlined below are common across many if not all social media platforms, platform affordances vary in their labelling, signifiers, and perceived effectiveness. Davis's (2017) theoretical framework of curatorial practices is used here as a starting point for the categorisation of the consumptive curatorial practices observed, as well as to provide some commonly cited motivations for their use. As shown in Table 5-1, I have categorised these practices as being either *attention allocation curation* or *affordance driven curation*, which diverges slightly from Davis's framework by the inclusion of network curation as a

subset of affordance-driven curation. This modification of Davis’s framework is justified as network curation is an ongoing process that is managed through available platform affordances. While attention allocation curation is also managed through platform affordances, the affordances engaged are site navigation specific—rather than action specific—and as such are discussed within their own categorisation.

As shown in Table 5-1, most curation practices described here relate to an action designed to either invite specific content into the feed or to dissuade it. However, the practices of having *multiple accounts*, and even *no social media accounts* are unique in that they both invite and dissuade content.

In the detailed analysis of each practice presented in sections 5.5.1 and 5.5.2 below, I have noted whether the practice was commonly engaged with actively (a) or passively (p) (see also Table 5-1). Of the 17 practices captured during data collection, two-thirds ($n=11$) were expressed by participants as active curation choices. Setting aside *multiple accounts* and *no social media accounts* for the moment, the majority of the 9 active curation practices acted to dissuade content from being shown in the social feed ($n=7$) rather than inviting more of the kind ($n=2$).

Table 5-1: Active and Passive Consumptive Curation Practices and Their Effect

	Invites content	Dissuades content
Attention allocation	(p) Linger on content	(p) Skipping/scrolling past content
Affordance driven curation	(a) Following an account (a) Interacting with account content	(a) Unfollowing an account (a) Hiding an account or content

	(p) Interacting with post display	(a) Hiding content with keywords
	(p) Searching content	(a) Blocking an account or content
	(p) Profile viewing	(a) Reporting an account or content
	(p) Saving content	(a) Reviewing advertiser targeting
		(a) Device affordances
		(a) Multiple accounts
		(a) No social media accounts

(a) = actively engaged practice, (p) = passively engaged practice

The dominance of active curation practices that dissuade content may in part be due to the frequency with which each practice is used in everyday social media usage. Following an account, liking or commenting on content, or following links shared in a post form part of the everyday practices of social media use, and create very obvious signals to platform recommender algorithms that the content is of interest. These practices also have very prominent affordance signifiers that are frequently seen by participants, with a ‘like’, ‘comment’ or ‘share’ button usually available on every social media post, and short cuts to ‘follow’ a new account common on posts as well.

In contrast, the signifiers of platform affordances related to active curation practices that dissuade content are frequently hidden behind additional on-screen three dot menus. While dissuading practices may have been more numerous, inviting practices were cited or demonstrated by participants with much more frequency. In the next section, these practices are discussed in detail, providing a detailed analysis of consumptive curation practices on social media platforms.

5.5.1 Attention allocation curation practices

Perhaps the simplest and most instinctive of curation practices involve allocating attention to content on a social media platform (Davis, 2017). Attention allocation as a concept is straight forward: users pay attention to a piece of content shown at the expense of other content available on screen. Within the context of consumptive curation practices, this relates to the ways in which users navigate the platform to read or view content without necessarily interacting with affordances such as liking, commenting, or sharing.

Attention allocation practices—that is, users viewing or ignoring/avoiding content—form the bulk of all activity on social media platforms for everyday users and are fundamental to any media platform or medium. However, when it comes to social media platforms it is important to note that just like on any web-based application, both lingering on content (invite) or skipping past it (dissuade) create data points that can be captured and interpreted by recommender systems (Figuerola Hurtado, 2016). In 2015, Facebook announced that it had started to give more weighting to posts that users spent longer looking at, thereby distinguishing between interest and poor Internet connection through the auxiliary data points available (Yu & Tas, 2015). As such, attention allocation contributes data points to content-based filtering and should be recognised as a predominantly passive consumptive curation practice. While ultimately platform navigation affordances are engaged to swipe or scroll to content of interest and past content that is not, I argue that attention allocation should not be considered an affordance-driven practice as the affordance engaged is required for interface navigation rather than to interact with specific content, pages, or accounts.

Throughout their media go-alongs, each participant in this study displayed attention allocation practices; however, they demonstrated low awareness of its contribution to the content on their social feed. Of the 13 participants, only one explicitly linked spending time

looking at content with algorithmic recommender systems (see quote from Chloe in section “*interacting with content display*” below), and one other participant questioned whether this forms part of the algorithmic processes on platforms:

Do they know how long you scroll on something, and look at something? Or do they know about your visiting history and then give you more of that? – Rebecca

As the various affordance-driven practices discussed above demonstrate, many everyday social media practices passively curate the feed but also have the potential to become active practices once a user starts to link the content that they are seeing to recommender algorithm logics. Attention allocation is the baseline practice of media consumption—we consume the content that we are interested in, leaving aside other available content that we may have less or no interest in. While conscious acknowledgement of its effect on the social feed was low, attention allocation nonetheless remained a significant passive consumptive curation practice due to its inextricable presence in basic platform usage, as well as by being a potential inflection point for everyday users to consider actively in their social media practices.

5.5.2 Affordance driven curation practices

While social media platforms differ in the kind of content or the type of networks that they encourage, a certain degree of homogeneity exists between them in regard to interface design and affordance signifiers. After all, these are social media platforms so it is to be expected that similar affordances will be available across different platforms to facilitate the sharing of content in an intuitive manner for all users, as well as to provide ways for other users to respond to the content they encounter. While many of these affordances effectively produce the same functional outcome on a platform, their location within the platform interface, as well as how they have been labelled or come to be known, can vary. The below list groups

together and categorises curation practices around common platform affordances observed in the data collection phase. The list establishes a common set of terms for discussion of practices and affordances in this and the following chapters.

5.5.2.1 Affordance driven curation practices that *invite* content into the feed

The practices outlined in this section act to invite content into the social feed. They are driven by participant use of platform affordances that provided these users with a means by which they can indicate what kind of content they are interested in, with an expectation that they will see more content like it or from the same account in future. Notably, all of the practices in this section form part of the everyday practices of social media use. Their impact on social feed curation is discussed here in detail.

Following an account (invite)

Figure 5-1: 13 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Following Accounts



Following an account falls within the scope of network curation as the accounts that a user connects to on a social platform create the pool from which algorithms filter content to be shown in or hidden from the personalised feed (Davis, 2017). Whilst users of Facebook can ‘add’ friends, and LinkedIn users can ‘connect’ with each other to create an undirected (mutual) network tie, users on these platforms can also ‘follow’ public accounts and pages to create directed (unilateral) network ties (Yang et al., 2017). On the other hand, platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok allow users to ‘follow’ an account, offering an initial

directed network tie that may or may not then be reciprocated to form an undirected tie. As the focus of this thesis is on the consumptive curatorial practices of users, the term ‘following’ will be the preferred term used to describe the possible inclusion of an account’s content within the personalised feed. As such, the act of following an account is perhaps the primary curation action available to all social media users, and one that continues throughout the life of the social media account. This practice can be enacted as active curation, especially in the case of following public pages such as those of celebrities and influencers, commercial brands, or politicians, or more passively enacted when establishing more interpersonal connections, such as between family and friends, that is, people who are known offline.

Once an account is followed, the effect of this network connection can be brought front of mind for some users through the content prioritised in the social feed. Participants in this study frequently drew connections between the accounts they followed and the content they saw, with every participant explicitly making this connection during the media go-alongs. This makes ‘following’ the most cited indicator of algorithmic literacy in the cohort ($n=87$), aligning with human-algorithm interplay in the AMCA-scale (Zarouali et al., 2021). Participants with higher levels of algorithmic literacy according to this metric—such as Joshua, Emma, Alex, and Chloe—tended to make this connection repeatedly throughout the data collection period. However, this awareness of network influence goes beyond merely understanding that if they follow an account they might see content from it on their feed, to an understanding of collaborative-based filtering from the platform algorithm. As articulated in the following comments, participants understood that collaborative-based recommendations, such as content from accounts that their network has interacted with or has a tie to, were an inevitable part of their social media feed:

Again, another meme that... a lot of these memes I'm seeing because other people have been tagged in them, not that it was actually in my feed. – Chloe

I've seen quite a bit of stuff on climate change. I follow this woman who's, I don't know, she's become kind of like an advocate. It's interesting. I guess it just came up because, you know, someone who I know liked this stuff. Yeah. So that's why some of this stuff comes up. – Rebecca

I find it really interesting that other people can see it (on LinkedIn), as in, it appears on their newsfeed. Which Facebook and Instagram don't do that as much as what they used to. You could kind of like stuff and it not really appear on other people's channels. But you really do see everybody's everything. I don't know whether that's an algorithm thing, or kind of any movement that people make tends to appear. – Lauren

Participants also understood that collaborative-based recommendations could appear either in the main social feed or in the explore/discovery section of the app interface:

I'd say that's because of the pages that I follow. They're quite progressive, at least in my eyes. And they like to be on topic and relevant and discuss issues as they come. So, I'd say that's probably why I started seeing a lot of it, because it makes sense with the people that I follow. – Sarah

Yeah, usually they would have, like kind of recommended other creatives. Like I know other figures in the Australian kind of comedy or political commentary community did speak in defence of Friendly Jordies. And so that was when I kind of like got recommended Philip DeFranco stuff as well – Stephanie

Finally, participants also articulated a link between the accounts that they followed and the advertisements or sponsored content they were shown:

The last little while, Instagram's just like here, have all these pregnancy reels and have all these kids accounts. And all of my targeted advertising is like ovulation testing and fertility treatments. And it's so weird. I don't know if it's because like, all my friends are having babies and stuff, but it's very strange. – Emma

On Instagram, like, I'll get sponsored ads and stuff. But the sponsored ads are never usually that weird. Like they're usually like based off what I've been following. So, for example, like, I recently followed a whole bunch of like skincare brands. Now on my sponsored ads other skincare brands that are like, or even suggested people, who half of them I don't even know, so I'm not gonna follow them. – Jessica

These comments highlight participants' understanding of both content and collaborative-based filtering by platform algorithms. By following an account, each participant was able to directly and indirectly influence the content they might see within their feed, making following an account an effective practice for consumptive curation. However, further curatorial actions were required to ensure that they would actually see content from the accounts that they were directly following, as a lack of interaction with content from an account also affected how frequently content from that account or recommendations based on the account type would be seen in the future.









Interacting with/contributing to account content (invite)

Figure 5-2: 8 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Interacting with Content



Interacting with an account encompasses a wide range of practices that make use of the most obvious—and therefore most used—platform affordances (other than navigation affordances, see 5.5.1 above). These include what Hayes et al. (2016) term “paralinguistic digital affordances” (PDA): actions such as ‘like’, ‘upvote’, ‘care’, ‘support’, etc., as well as commenting, and (re)sharing content. Table 5-2 shows the PDAs available on the platforms used by participants in this project at the time of data collection. The table shows that all platforms offered a ‘like’ button (or in the case of Reddit, ‘upvote’), but only YouTube and Reddit offered a button that was designed to indicate that the content was expressly *not* enjoyed. Both Facebook and LinkedIn offered an extended range of ‘reactions’ to content framed as either emotions (on Facebook) or verbs and adjectives (on LinkedIn). For Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Tumblr, users were only offered a binary choice: click the like button, or not.

Table 5-2: Paralinguistic Digital Affordances on Cited Social Media Platforms, Circa 2021

 Facebook	 Instagram	 TikTok	 Twitter	 LinkedIn	 YouTube	 Reddit	 Tumblr
 Like	 Like	 Like	 Like	 Like	 Like	 Upvote	 Like
 Love				 Celebrate	 Dislike	 Downvote	
 Haha				 Support			
 Wow				 Love			
 Sad				 Insightful			
 Angry				 Curious			

The act of using a PDA, commenting on, or (re)sharing content represents the most common practice on social media platforms, and for the most part may not be motivated by curatorial ambitions. For example, PDAs can serve multiple purposes on social platforms with Hayes et al. identifying four common motivations for their use: “literal interpretation, acknowledgement of viewing, social support and grooming, and utilitarian purposes” (2016, p. 178). While each of these motivations were evident in the practices of the participants—especially the desire to show support for the content being created—a fifth motivation was also commonly cited: helping the algorithm.

During data collection almost all participants engaged with PDAs ($n=12$), but of these two-thirds ($n=8$) explicitly stated that they ‘liked’ content to invite more of its type into their social feed (active curation). This is a strong example of how using PDAs can be both a passive and active curation practice for the same participant, depending on their motivations in the moment of action. Participants articulated their understanding of how their interactions actively influenced algorithmic content-based filtering, making a direct link between their engagement with content and what was promoted to them on their feed:

So yeah, liked it. Help it out in the algorithm. – Sarah

As well as from an algorithm point of view, I know that if I engage with my friends and family’s content, Facebook will know to keep that content relevant to me and keep it up at the top of my newsfeed. – Lauren

I try not to like every single video on TikTok, so that it kind of customises a little bit better. It’s like, if I like every single video, it’s going to confuse the algorithm. – Joshua

Therefore, while interacting with content is commonly used to respond to content or to signal support to friends and family, participants also knew that these interactions would influence algorithmic recommendations in the future. It is also worth noting here that another motivation for the use of PDAs was the desire to save content where an explicit save affordance was not available (see section “*saving content*” for more on this observation). Although not commonly reported among the participants, this additional motivation is a reminder of the ways in which users can adapt existing affordances to suit their needs.

Interacting with post display (invite)

Figure 5-3: 0 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Interacting with Post Display



Not to be confused with interacting with account content, as discussed above, interacting with *post display* here refers to the decisions made by users to either open links, click on an image preview to see the full image, playing a video, expand text captions, or expand the comments section for purely consumptive reasons. Whereas PDAs, comments, and (re)shares leave a visual mark on the content that can be seen by other users, interacting with display content leaves no visible platform record for other users to interpret. That is, everyday account holders who post content on social media are able to see how many likes, comments, or reshares their post has garnered but there is no way for them to track on the social platform if a shared link was opened, whether the full text caption they wrote was read, or if any of their followers read the comments left by other users. However, each of these actions creates a data point for platform algorithms to interpret as a sign of interest in the content: that a link was opened, an image was viewed, a video played, that a user expanded the caption text by clicking on the ‘read more’ prompt, or if a user clicked the ‘read more comments’ prompt.

Participants demonstrated varying degrees of understanding of the link between interacting with a post and what was in their feed. Their responses range from speculation to concrete belief, as evidenced by these comments:

Like actually, you know what? I think I’ve screwed up my profile by clicking on this ad. – Joshua

I'm getting a lot of celebrity gossip, which obviously I clicked on something recently, and it's trying to show me a lot of like "Sophie Turner applauded Blake Lively for getting real about her postpartum body insecurities". And that definitely happened because I clicked on an article where Blake Lively talked about postpartum body insecurities, and now that's all I'm getting. – Jessica

I am aware that, you know, if I click it, then it's taking some data, it's processing how many clicks and how long I viewed it for, and the fact that it's a sponsored post (...) So the thought of sponsored posts, and Facebook using my data and all information about me to give me a structured post... it seems a bit scary to think how much they know about me. – Chloe

This link between interaction with posts and feed personalisation was the second most cited indicator of algorithmic literacy on the AMCA-scale (Zarouali et al., 2021); not only was it commented on by participants throughout the study but it was mentioned by every participant on multiple occasions ($n=64$). However, engaging in this practice consciously—that is, by opening or not opening a link or expanding a text display—was not explicitly mentioned or demonstrated by any participants during the interviews and media go-alongs. Rather, this was enacted as a passive curation practice that most participants were only conscious of after the fact, or after they had linked content being shown in the moment to past interactions on the platform.

Searching content (invite)

Figure 5-4: 0 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Searching Content



While many users are happy to explore the algorithmically generated social feed, there may be times when a user would like to search for specific content or accounts. The search bar function was frequently utilised by all participants; for instance, they used it to locate specific accounts that they were already connected to, or that they wanted to follow—such as celebrities, influencers, or a new acquaintance—contributing to the above-mentioned practice of following an account. Searching for content or accounts does not necessarily result in the user finding that content; even so, the act of searching for a name or term still creates a data point to be interpreted by the platform. Along with in-platform searches, each participant in this study reported a link between off-platform search activity affecting the content they saw on their social feeds, indicating insight and understanding of 3rd party data tracking (discussed further in the section “*device affordances*” below). This awareness also acted as additional indicator of algorithmic literacy on the AMCA-scale (Zarouali et al., 2021), with 42 mentions during the interviews and media go-alongs related to the dimension of human-algorithm interplay.

A minority of participants ($n=5$) expressed a belief in the established folk theory of devices listening to their face-to-face conversations and then providing advertising content related to the topic (DeVito et al., 2018). Regardless of whether the data point is created by an in-platform or 3rd party app search, or whatever the motivation behind a search may be—

such as general or momentary interest—the platform may still interpret this search data as relevant to the user’s interest and include related content in the social feed. All participants linked their search history to the content they were seeing although interest in harnessing this for curatorial purposes was not expressly stated ($n=0$). As such, searching should generally be considered a passive form of consumptive curation practice albeit one that can be used consciously and in an active manner, as discussed further in Chapter 7.

Profile viewing (invite)

Figure 5-5: 0 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Viewing Profiles



Even though a platform algorithm may create a personalised feed for users, at times the user may want to directly view the profile of an account they already follow, or they are interested in viewing the profile of a particular account without then proceeding to connect with, or follow, that account. The motivations for doing this are manyfold: confirming details like birthdays, relationship status, or to find mutual friends; confirming the opening times or menus for retail or restaurants; to access the “link in bio” to which an account may direct their followers for more information, or to simply work out who an account belongs to. The latter motivation can be in response to profile changes as all users can engage in productive curation activities that include changing profile pictures as well as display names, two markers by which users quickly identify an account on their feed. When these markers change, the follower may question why they are seeing content from an account they do not recognise and access the profile in an attempt to ascertain who it is. Similarly, a user may

acquire a new follower they do not recognise from these same markers, which also drives them to access the profile to try and deduce more. Regardless of the motivation, direct access of a profile creates a data point for algorithmic recommenders to incorporate into their user profiles.

Only one participant in the cohort, Samantha, specifically described this type of action, stating that she was dismayed by the effect this kind of investigation had on her TikTok feed:

The other day it came up someone I was friends with, well not friends with, but it was like, oh, you know, these are your contacts on TikTok. And I clicked through to one of the pages to work out who it was, and he had all this stuff about cars, and I didn't follow his account, so I came out of it. And now I've noticed on my For You page I'm getting so much stuff to do with cars. So, I've been hiding all of that as well. –

Samantha

As with searching content, as discussed above, viewing a profile in this way is generally not engaged as an active curation practice; rather, a connection can be made after the fact to its passive curation effect on the social feed through general use of the platform. However, it can also be employed in a more active manner, as discussed in Chapter 7.

Saving content (invite)

Figure 5-6: 0 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Saving Content



As discussed above, most social media platforms offer similar affordances to users on the main interface although their labels or signifiers may vary. However, some platforms offer affordances that others do not, or hide the signifiers for these affordances behind menus. For example, at the time of data collection, Instagram was the only social media platform discussed by the participants with a signifier for the save affordance on the main mobile app interface. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Reddit offered a save or bookmark affordance behind a three dot menu while TikTok offered users an affordance to save content to their device as a downloaded file from this menu rather than the option to bookmark it within the app. Tumblr, on the other hand, offered no affordance to save or bookmark content at all. However, although both Tumblr and TikTok did not directly offer an in-app save or bookmarking affordance, they instead offered a 'liked' tab on the user profile page, driving participants like Chloe to 'like' content she would not otherwise 'like':

TikTok... I will scroll through, I will only 'like' something if I want it saved to look back on later because it all goes to a 'liked' section. So, it really is more for me to save it rather than me telling the creator oh, I liked your content. – Chloe

Just under half of the participants in the study ($n=6$) discussed using the save function frequently, for example, for when they wanted to save content to reference later for education or creative purposes such as recipes or tutorials, as well as memes or interesting content that they planned to share with family and friends at a later date:

Another thing that I noticed myself doing, I like to use Twitter bookmarks as well. And most of the ones that I bookmark are things that are like, learning and stuff. So "take your cybersecurity seriously", and this is just a list of things to make sure you do. And this one's Photoshop tips, which are interesting. This is "why should we hire you" like, you know, interview tips and stuff like that. This is again, some Animal Crossing

content to look at for referencing. Yeah, “how to treat COVID at home”. This 2021 mood tracker. – Sarah

This one, I saved a recipe. Which I don’t think I’ll ever do. I’ve probably got lots of saved recipes which I’m like, “I’m going to do that one day”, and then it gets lost in my library of saved TikToks. – Chloe

I’m kind of categorising good TikToks. Like, saving them and putting them into categories. So, when I need to have a response for something, but I don’t feel like responding to it, I can send a TikTok. – Joshua

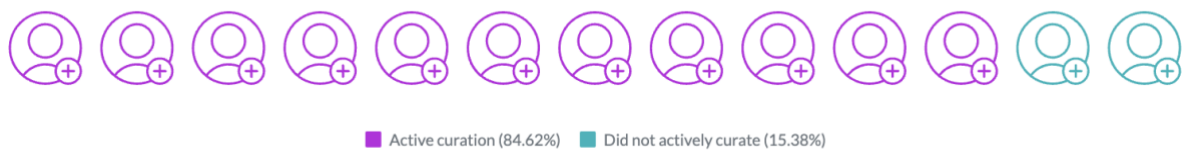
As of the time of writing, TikTok had joined Instagram in including a save button on the app’s interface, allowing users to create collections for easier retrieval later. Saving content—whether through liking or a dedicated in-app affordance—acts similarly to other interactions with an account, as described above, and creates a data point for algorithmic content-based filtering to interpret content as desirable to the user in a passive manner. None of the six participants who discussed, or demonstrated, saving content stated that they were doing so to influence the algorithm; nor did they link this practice to content they later saw on the social feed. As such, saving content was only observed as a passive curation practice.

5.5.2.2 Affordance driven curation practices that *dissuade* content from the feed

The practices outlined in this section act to dissuade content from being seen on the social feed, if not to outright block content from entering the feed. As discussed above, these practices are driven by platform affordances that for the most part do not have obvious on-screen signifiers, as they are frequently being accessed via three dot menus. Each is discussed in detail below.

Unfollowing an account (dissuade)

Figure 5-7: 11 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Unfollowing Accounts



Also falling within the category of network curation, accounts can be unfollowed as easily as they can be followed. This acts as a direct signal to the platform's algorithmic filtering mechanisms to exclude the account content from the pool from which it draws when creating the personalised feed. However, due to platform priorities, content from the account may still be shown to an individual user, especially where commercial brands pay to promote their content to a targeted audience through platform advertising, or where a 3rd party account with a mutual connection may interact with content through gesturing, commenting, or re-sharing. That said, unfollowing an account as an active form of curation was perhaps the most effective means by which participants curated content out of their social feeds. Motivations to unfollow varied. For some, unfollowing accounts was a regular curatorial activity, driven by a thought-out methodology behind the culling process such as disinterest in the content they were seeing from these accounts:

The way that it sorts my followers list is that it puts the people that I interact with the most kind of at the top, so I just kind of go scroll all the way to the bottom. And I'm like, who are the people at the bottom? Because I'm not interacting with their content? And I don't know if that means they're not interacting with mine or not, but that's usually a sign if they're at the bottom. – Jessica

I'll do a purge once or twice a year. So, I think my next purge will probably be sometime in winter when I'm feeling a bit dark and depressed, and I'll do a bit of a clear out. – Amy

One thing I did on Instagram is I went through and unfollowed anything that was inactive or not interesting to me anymore. So, I went from having about 1100 following to having, I think, less than 900. – Olivia

For others, accounts were unfollowed due to a misalignment of values or ethics:

No, I'll unfollow for sure. Like, if I don't agree with the message. I mean, okay, look. For an example, there was this influencer, I cannot remember her name, in America, who did a giveaway for cosmetic procedures, like lip enhancement or botox or something along the lines of that, and obviously got a lot of negative feedback from that. But for me, someone that's willing to do something like that is not someone that I would align with. So, I would unfollow, yes. However, you know, obviously, there's a line, you know, if they're promoting something that's pretty unoffensive, you know, accessories, glasses, hair product. But when it starts to be, you know, diet plans, exercise plans, slimming teas, fat burning tablets, vitamins, that's when I think it goes into a whole other realm. – Lauren

Um, yes, actually, there's a person on Twitter who I unfollowed recently because she has turned her entire page into anti-vaccine propaganda. – Emma

People who I got sick of seeing talk. So, on that whole thing that I was saying before, about, like, the whole thing of men rushing to be like the best ally, and be the best at

decrying the sexism in a kind of disingenuous way, I got really annoyed at a few people who are doing that. So, I unfollowed them. – Alex

Another driver for unfollowing accounts (as well as hiding, see below) was the negative impact some forms of content could have on the mental health of participants:

At the time I was like, I felt obligated to be friends with them. I'm like, but outside of that environment, I'm like, we have nothing in common. You actually were never particularly nice to me. I don't really need to follow you. And then some of that is just like, oh, I just don't need to see that. Like, you know, for like quite a few that were like very, very... not that I'm overweight or anything like that. But it's just that like they're very tiny. Like I always have genuinely quite good body image, like self-assertion. But this makes me feel really crap about myself, so I will unfollow you. – Jessica

The examples above demonstrate the effectiveness of unfollowing accounts as a consumptive curation practice, as well as the degree of willingness some participants had to regularly cull accounts from their social networks. However, almost forty percent of participants ($n=5$) stated that they never unfollowed accounts, either across all of their social media accounts or on specific platforms. For example, Rebecca stated that she regularly unfollowed accounts on Instagram that no longer interested her, but never unfollowed accounts on Facebook:

I can't be bothered, there're like 700 people on Facebook. And yeah, I don't know, it just... Facebook doesn't bother me as much as Instagram. – Rebecca

One interpretation of Rebecca's approach might lie in the nature of the network ties that exist between accounts on the two platforms, with Facebook's undirected ties and Instagram's initial directed ties involving differing levels of emotional labour associated with unfollowing an account—that is, it is easier to unfollow the account of an influencer or celebrity you have

never met and who does not reciprocally follow you than it is to unfollow a friend or family member that you have a connection with offline. However, this is conjecture on my behalf, as an exploration of why some participants did or did not unfollow specific accounts was beyond the scope of the data collected in this research project.

Of the five participants that mentioned that they did not unfollow accounts, each cited apathy or, like Rebecca above, being ‘unbothered’ by who they are connected to on a platform. This lack of motivation to remove accounts may in part be explained by the recommender algorithms on each platform hiding or demoting content from accounts that a user has not engaged with recently. Ultimately, if a user is not seeing content from a specific account, it can be easy to forget that it exists, and it is therefore unproblematic to keep it as a network connection. In this context, the algorithm takes over as the primary curator of the account, and if it has done its job well in promoting content that is of interest to the user, the impetus for action from the users themselves is removed.

A final motivation for not unfollowing accounts was uncovered in a discussion with Amy during a media go-along, in which Amy complained about the news content she was seeing on her Facebook feed. The content in question was from news media accounts that she was following rather than suggested content, or content that people within her network had liked or commented on. When asked if she had ever considered unfollowing those pages, she responded:

If it's really annoying, then of course I start unfollowing it, but there's... So this one, I don't know if I follow it. It just happens to... no, I actually have followed it. But I don't know why. But I like to keep it there because there are some content that I like. And I always want to see what is going on because I... normally I wouldn't see something like this, for example, I don't even know who Tony Armstrong is. But I almost want to

keep my finger on the pulse. I just want to see what's happening. Even though I know it's really tailored for my interest, which you can tell is relatively left wing. But it's like I don't want to unfollow ABC news, but I do think if there's too much content, if I don't like what I'm seeing too often, then I will start to unfollow it. But because I can, as you can see, I just casually flick through it, I can live with it. – Amy

This example again highlights some users' enjoyment of algorithmically recommended content, as well as how they may prefer to consumptively curate their social feed through the passive practices of attention allocation, discussed in greater detail in section 5.5.1 above.

Hiding an account or content (dissuade)

Figure 5-8: 6 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Hiding an Account or Content



As discussed above, unfollowing an account can involve emotional labour, especially where a relationship exists both on social media and offline (such as friendships, professional relationships, and familial relationships). While social media platforms do not send a notification to an account holder that someone has unfollowed their account, it may still come to their attention through other platform cues such as the follower or friend count, or in the case of undirected ties where one account holder tries to tag or view the profile of another account. As such, there may be occasions where a user wants to withdraw an account's content from their personalised feed but do not want to signal to that account that the network tie has been removed or converted from an undirected to a directed tie. Just under half of the participants in the cohort ($n=6$) demonstrated or discussed hiding content from their social

feed during the interviews and media go-alongs. For the purposes of clarity, removing content from the social feed without removing the network connection is referred to here as hiding content. This distinction is necessary as different platforms label the act of hiding content from the social feed differently, and some use the term ‘unfollow’. For example, at the time of data collection, Facebook afforded users to ‘unfollow’ pages and accounts; however, unfollowing a *page* removed both content and the directed tie, whereas unfollowing an *account* removed its content from the feed but kept the undirected tie intact. Unfollow was used by LinkedIn in the same way, whereas Instagram and Twitter offered the option to ‘mute’ the account. Facebook’s affordances also allowed additional actions such as to ‘snooze’ content from a specific user for 30 days, or to ‘hide’ a single post in the feed, providing additional middle ground options between following and unfollowing an account. It is important to note that TikTok and Tumblr only afford users the option to remove or block an account, rather than to hide its content.

The practice of hiding content rather than unfollowing accounts was cited by some participants ($n=3$) as a way of managing their social feed, and this was done to maintain relationships that were important to them. Reasons cited for hiding content were generally similar to the motivations for unfollowing accounts, such as where the participants were seeing content from accounts that perhaps posted too frequently, posted content that was upsetting, or that posted content that they were not interested in at all:

I’ve unfollowed but not un-friended one person who is somebody that I share an office with. But they click ‘interested in’ events often and for some reason my Facebook just keeps putting them up as things that I might be interested in. And I’m not. And so, the way to get around that was to just hide posts, unfollow that for the next little while, maybe I’ll start back up soon, but yeah. – Georgia

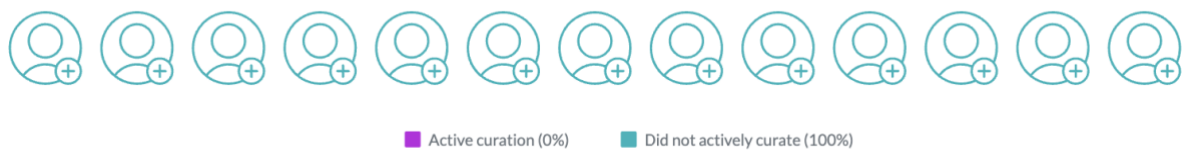
I muted a lot of people on Twitter, like instead of unfollowing them, so they don't know that you've muted them. – Emma

I did mute one of my friends. She just... I don't know, this is actually one of my good friends. But it's like her pole dancing stuff. I know how this sounds, and I'm not normally petty, but it was just making me feel shitty, because like I'm not doing any exercise. I'm so unfit right now. I don't want to see her fit body, so it was just triggering for me. It was like, I went on Instagram one day, and I saw some of her pictures, and she looked so good. And I was like, sorry, you are one of my good friends, but I just feel like crap right now. I'm not motivated to do anything. (...)
Sometimes I can just kind of get into a sad, like a loop when you see stuff on Instagram. It was like one of those moments, and it's not like she did anything wrong. I just don't want to see that right now, so I muted her. And that's probably the only person that I muted or one of the few people I've actually muted. But I just wasn't in the mood for it, and I don't want to see it on my Instagram, because I'm just not feeling it. - Rebecca

Hiding content is therefore a highly active form of consumptive curation that is also very effective for managing content on the social feed. However, as with unfollowing accounts (discussed above), it was not commonly enacted across the cohort. Less than half of the participants ($n=6$) discussed or demonstrated hiding content from their social feed, even though all participants ($n=13$) acknowledge it as an option available to them.

Hiding content with keywords (dissuade)

Figure 5-9: 0 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Hiding Content with Keywords



Another way in which users can consumptively curate content on social media is to filter out content that contains specific keywords. This practice can be framed as a content moderation practices although it is specific and local to the individual user. However, the practice of enabling keyword moderation was not common across the cohort, with only one participant discussing its availability as a tool for managing content, and even then explicitly stating that she did not use keyword blocking herself. As Sarah explained:

For me, personally, I don't really use any of those. Just because I like getting my content as unfiltered as possible. And I know that the algorithm already edits it a lot. And I just think if I did all this to, I guess, avoid issues, avoid seeing what I can see, I might get into a really dangerous bubble, not know what's going on in the world. Like, I can imagine if someone had Twitter, and they had the word "sexual assault", or "rape" muted that the story in Australia about Scott Morrison, everything that went down in the government... I wonder if they would have seen that, or how they would get that on their timeline? It would be very limiting. So, I think that's just why, personally, I don't really use any of those. But I don't have any real reason to. So that's just from my perspective. – Sarah

While hiding content through keywords may be an effective means of curating content out of the social feed and its use suggests active curation of the social feed, it remained largely

unknown by the cohort and was not enacted by any of the participants during the data collection phase. Understanding the motivation for its use would therefore require further study into the practice.

Blocking an account or content (dissuade)

Figure 5-10: 6 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Blocking Content



At times, a more definitive action was preferred by users to ensure that a particular account was not only no longer a network tie, but that their content was not shown under any circumstances. This action also stopped the blocked account from seeing any of the user's account information or content. During the data collection phase, six participants discussed blocking an account or content from their social feed, representing just under half of the cohort. For these participants, blocking accounts and content was a regular activity that was engaged whenever they encountered content that was offensive, annoying, or derived from spam-type accounts:

In general, I'm pretty diligent about unfollowing and blocking people that annoy me. You know, I tend to have effectively a sort of three strikes policy with getting annoyed with people and then at that point I just unfollow, block, whatever's appropriate, move along. – Alex

I think I blocked a couple of people on Instagram for 'like' bombing my account. You know, like, it's just so annoying. You're sitting there trying to do something, and these

notifications are literally just like, uh, you know, and it's like, please stop, because they're just doing it to try and get you to follow them. – Emma

Things that I would normally kind of block out of the newsfeed are mostly just things that I find gross. I'm like, I don't need to see that weird medical thing happening. – Georgia

For the participants who practiced blocking content, it was an effective and active process that they engaged in consciously on a regular basis to ensure that their news feed content met their expectations and desires.

Reporting an account or content (dissuade)

Figure 5-11: 6 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Reporting Content



Depending on the platform, users can either report individual pieces of content, specific comments under their own or other account posts, direct messages, or entire account profiles. While almost all participants indicated that they were aware of reporting affordances on various platforms ($n=11$), just under half of the cohort ($n=6$) discussed reporting content themselves. Although the practice of reporting content was not often raised by participants, it is nonetheless an available action that can impact what is seen on the personalised feed. One participant discussed having their own content reported and accounts temporarily blocked on Instagram and TikTok for discussing disordered eating²¹. Reporting or ‘flagging’ content can

²¹ It is important to note that this participant was not promoting disordered eating on social media; rather, they were discussing their struggles with recovery from an eating disorder using “algospeak” to avoid automated content moderation.

require additional effort, take a long time to be reviewed by the platform, and may not always result in the offending content being removed (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016). For example, Chloe was surprised by some content that made it onto her ‘For You’ page that was not deemed to be in breach of the platform’s community standards:

There was one video that I reported on TikTok (...) I think it was like a snake ripping apart an animal, and there was no warning or anything on it. And I was like, this is a gruesome video. (...) And TikTok was like, oh, we reviewed it. But we don’t think it’s gruesome. And I found that really interesting. – Chloe

Others reported that the effort required to report content or accounts amounted to more effort than they were willing to expend, or that the moderation process was too slow in response:

I do remember my boyfriend talking me out of reporting someone, where I think there was a comment that really was just upsetting, and I thought I should report it. And he was like, nah, let it go babe. And I usually don’t report people. Like, even in the past, a long time ago when I was public on Twitter, and I had people attacking me for saying that we should believe sexual assault victims, I didn’t really report them. Just because I feel like reporting does take a little bit of work. – Sarah

Even though people like me report things, it’s slow to take things down. – Joshua

Those participants who had reported content or accounts, each explained that they were doing so to “tell the algorithm” that they did not want to see this kind of content, or, as was the case in one instance, to try to inform the user that their account may have been hacked.

Examination of the practice of alternative spelling as a means of circumnavigating algorithmic content moderation is beyond the scope of this thesis. For more on the topic, see Chung (2020) and Lorenz (2022).

It depends if I'm in a crappy mood, or I'll just be like, go away. I don't want to see it.

I'll report it. Because I don't want to see it. – Rebecca

The first one I saw, like oh, lol, this person's been hacked or whatever. But then the second or third time I reported the post as spam. I was like, I don't care, I don't want to see this. And (it) also let the person know something's happened. – Jessica

As these examples demonstrate, reporting content is an active form of consumptive curation; however, comfort levels for enacting this practice varied across the cohort.

Reviewing advertiser targeting (dissuade)

Figure 5-12: 3 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Reviewing Ad Targeting



As discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between personalisation of content on social media feeds and advertising is particularly durable. Platform algorithms are programmed to prioritise content that appeals to the individual user, encourages them to interact with more accounts and content, and results in more time spent on the platform with more personalised advertising able to be shown (Seaver, 2018). While opinions on social media advertising varied from participant to participant, it was viewed as an accepted part of the social media experience, at times even a welcome one. Twenty-three percent of participants ($n=3$) were aware of the content link between advertising and their interests or demographic data and were comfortable reviewing the platform's advertiser targeting information where available.

At the time of data collection, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn's sponsored or promoted content included a somewhat hidden affordance for users to discover why the specific advert had been shown to them. This affordance typically linked to the platform's personalised advert settings, providing an option to not see further ads from the advertiser, or not to see ads based on the specified criteria. Joshua, for example, frequently reviewed why he was seeing certain advertising, and was sometimes surprised by the criteria associated with his profile:

But the whole thing is, when I'm on Facebook I can click on it and see what they're trying to target advertise (...) I'll click on this one, "you're seeing most recent ad topics". Parenting! Oh, it thinks I have a child! – Joshua

For some users, however, the accuracy or inaccuracy of the targeting criteria was of little import, and at times provided an amusing break from content they regularly saw, as Georgia explained during an interview:

Sometimes I go into them to find out why I'm seeing something. Like, I got an ad for ultrasounding goats, I think, the other day, was what it was. So, it was an agricultural ultrasound machine, made specifically for animals. And I was like, why is this for me? But apparently, I'm interested in farming. (...) Hilariously though, I didn't tell them not to keep showing it to me. I was like, sure if it comes up again, it does. – Georgia

By reviewing this type of content—which perhaps does not get as much attention in discussions of consumptive curation—these participants were able to partially curate the ads and sponsored posts on their personalised feed. As this affordance is not obvious from the main navigational interface, having knowledge of it is a precursor to its practice, making it a purely active curation practice. Participants who actively curated their feed through reviewing ads generally discovered this affordance when they were wanting to hide or report advertising

content, illustrating once again how knowledge of algorithms on social media platforms is gained through experience interacting with the platform.

Device affordances (dissuade)

Figure 5-13: 3 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by Actively Using Device Affordances



In addition to their awareness of interactions on social media platforms and their effects, a third of the participants ($n=5$) were aware of mobile phone device settings that can also contribute to algorithmic filtering such as data tracking and geo-location. Data tracking came to the fore during the data collection period with Apple's introduction of App Tracking Transparency in their release of iOS 14.5 in April of 2021. App Tracking Transparency allows users of iOS 14.5 and above to specify whether they allow the apps on their device to track their actions across other apps that they use (Cross, 2021). For example, allowing Facebook to track across apps would mean that, along with access to data points for content-based filtering from the user's activity on Facebook, it could also gather data points from the user's activity on other apps they access on the same device such as other social platforms, web browsers, streaming services, games, as well as other applications and utilities. Tracking across apps allows developers to create detailed profiles of the user based not only on activity on their own platforms but what users are doing on other apps on the same device, contributing to personalised content and advertisements seen on these platforms. Each participant who used an iOS device and who was interviewed after its introduction ($n=3$) commented that they had specified that the apps could not track their activity on other apps,

with some then observing that the quality of the targeted advertising had changed noticeably as a result. For example, Samantha stated that:

I've asked the apps not to track. It's just funny how now a lot of the content is completely irrelevant. And it almost makes you wonder if they show you certain things. Perhaps I'm just cynical and angry at it all, but they show you some things that are so far removed, that you almost feel like annoyed that they're so far removed, that you're like, oh, well, maybe I do miss the more personalised ads. – Samantha

All participants ($n=13$) indicated that, beyond the introduction of App Tracking Transparency, they were aware of social media platforms tracking their actions and data outside of their activity on the platform itself (as previously mentioned in relation to 'search' above), which is evident in the following comments relating to other non-search related activity:

I bought something from this place in store, but it's linked up to my account, and my email's linked up with Facebook. So, I think that's how they know. – Lauren

This is an ad from a website I was looking at, so they've obviously tracked what I've been looking at. – Chloe

I love their chocolate, so I probably purchased something through online shopping. It's funny how they know. – Rebecca

Um, okay. I actually don't follow this brand. But the ads... it's because I've got their app. – Amy

Maybe it's a me thing, but I used to have an app to track my period, which I had on my watch. And I think it's reading off my watch and then feeding back into my ads because I never get ads about periods until I'm near my period. – Olivia

It's really strange how things I was watching on YouTube and YouTube shorts started popping up on TikTok. – Joshua

As with searching content, this awareness of platform profiling did not result in active curation practices unless it was directly linked to 3rd party app tracking, with participants only making the connection between their off-platform activity and the social feed after the fact.

5.5.2.3 Affordance driven curation practices that both *invite* and *dissuade* content

The following social media curation practices are unique in that they both *invite* and *dissuade* content into or out of the social feed. How these practices manage to do both is discussed in more detail below.

Multiple accounts (invite and dissuade)

Figure 5-14: 4 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed with Multiple Accounts



Almost one third of the participants in this study had multiple accounts on the same social media platform ($n=4$), especially Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Unlike popular ‘finstagram’ accounts, which users primarily create for productive curation purposes (Kang & Wei, 2020), each participant who engaged in this practice explained that they maintained multiple accounts to manage the kind of content they saw, as well as what followers saw

from them, and represented an attempt to curate their social feeds to reflect a certain aspect of their interests or identity. ‘Professional’ versus ‘personal’ Twitter profiles were common, as too were separate Instagram accounts to maintain a social feed specific to an interest. For example, both Sarah and Alex maintained professional Twitter accounts for engaging with other people and brands within their industries, which were in addition to their personal accounts for connecting with friends, as well as accounts that aligned with their personal interests. Sarah maintained two Instagram accounts, Emma four, while Olivia managed six on Instagram and another three on TikTok. Sarah, Emma, and Olivia all have personal or ‘Rinsta’ accounts on Instagram where they primarily followed friends, family, and other public figures and brands they enjoyed (Kang & Wei, 2020), while their other accounts were specific to particular interests. In Emma’s case, there were separate art accounts for different styles she enjoyed creating, while Olivia kept separate accounts for each of her hobbies and interests, such as crafting and sports. In all cases, participants discussed how this approach allowed them to keep a feed that was filled with content aligned to the account’s intended purpose:

I have two side accounts. But one of them is like a fandom side account, so I use that to follow artists whose work I like looking at. And then the other one is a locked personal account. – Alex

And then I’ve got my main art account, which is for.... So I have a lot of art styles. But that one is very realistic, colourful painting kind of thing. (...) And then my other one is another art page for a different style, which is only a new page that I created. But basically it’s line art, it’s very minimalistic, more illustrations. – Emma

I have a full six accounts, but I only have five showing on there. So, I have my skating account, because I’m a figure skater, so I have figure skating videos. Then I have my

crochet account, because I am a crochet artis, so I've got little Frogman. I've got my main account. I've got this old account that I used to rant on that I don't really use anymore. And I've got a new account that I'm building. It doesn't have anything on it, but I still go on it sometimes to like stuff. – Olivia

In this way, each account became a channel of content, and each account required curation to establish the bounds within which the algorithm was expected to recommend content. The practice of maintaining multiple accounts is an active form of curation that took advantage of platform affordances that simplify switching between accounts like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok.

No social media accounts (invite and dissuade)

Figure 5-15: 1 of 13 Participants Curated their Feed by not Having an Account



Although it may seem counterintuitive to include a lack of social media accounts as a curation tactic, for participant Stephanie, this was precisely why she did not currently have any active social media accounts. She continued to view content on Reddit and YouTube without signing into an account, meaning that she did not follow any accounts and was unable to interact with content, for example, through PDAs, commenting, or re-sharing on these platforms. In this way, Stephanie was able to both invite content into her feed through content selection captured in browser cookies and attention allocation practices (see 5.5.1 above), as well as to dissuade specific content from being seen by not following any specific accounts and through attention allocation.

Stephanie explained in the initial interview that she had previously closed her social media accounts as she had been dissatisfied with the amount of time that she was spending on these platforms and was also concerned about the impact that content from her networks was having on her mental health. Nonetheless, she still wanted to keep up-to-date with current events and issues, and preferred social media to do this. In her own words:

I think it's very considered, the way that I use social media. I am trying to limit it as much as I can. And I think, for me, the way that I approach it is... because I've felt anxious and sad in the past, I don't necessarily want to engage with people on it. And I don't want to leave that line of communication open, which sounds very insular. But I want to be up-to-date, and I want to know what people are talking about. I don't want to put myself out there, again, and I haven't – that shows in the way that I use social media. (...) You're able to use a lot of social media as a 'lurker', or as a bystander. But if you actually want to engage, they will make you sign up. I think it's the same with Instagram and Twitter and stuff like that. You can log on, and you can see things, but in order to actually like something or whatever, you'll have to make an account. – Stephanie

By viewing content on Reddit and YouTube through a web browser without signing in, she was able to enjoy entertaining and informative content without being exposed to content that was abusive or which encouraged her to compare herself to others. This was a very conscious approach to active curation and, importantly, many affordances were still available to her without signing in, and data points were still being generated that were managed within site cookies for the platform algorithms to process and recommend content from. Stephanie commented on the personalisation of content that was still taking place based on her activity on these platforms:

But I think (YouTube) is pretty good in recommending me stuff that like I've already watched. I usually watch the same channels anyway. (...) This channel is always recommended to me as I use a lot of these videos for like background studying. (...) Yeah, so I think it gets some of my interests. – Stephanie

While initially Stephanie was motivated to not have social media accounts due to the experiences she had had with other users and their content, as the interviews progressed, she became more aware of the algorithmic processing taking place through site cookies and became increasingly concerned about her privacy. She expressed a sense of helplessness in being able to manage this while accessing social media content:

Well, they clearly use my data as much as they can, even if I don't have a profile associated with them. And I'm not sure if everyone was aware of this. (...) Like, at the moment, I'm probably more concerned about the data privacy than, you know, the content that I'm being fed, because I think I've learnt to deal with that in my own way. But at the moment, yeah. I don't know how to control that privacy part. So, it's a little bit more concerning to me. – Stephanie

This comment highlights how for some users there is both a desire for personal agency in social media use and at the same time a frustration at their inability to enact agency in ways they would prefer.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the concept of active curation, which is the culmination of practices in which everyday users consciously and frequently engage in an attempt to either invite specific content into their social feed, or to ensure that specific content is no longer seen. I have argued that active curation practices arise in response to algorithmic

recommender systems on social media platforms determining what content is seen or hidden from the user's social feed, in the absence of previously available default chronological timelines. These active curation practices are a means by which everyday users are able to enact agency within social media platform systems and are driven by users' algorithmic literacy, their motivations for curating their social feed, and expectations of how the algorithm will respond to their actions. Importantly, active curation is also driven by the frequent updates made to algorithm priorities, as discussed in Chapter 7.

The data presented in this chapter suggests that curation practices were actively engaged by participants as a response to the perception that their social media feeds were curated by platform recommender algorithms characterised by opaque logics and priorities. This is highlighted by those participants who demonstrated higher levels of algorithmic literacy against the AMCA-scale being more likely to engage in or discuss active curation practices during the interviews and media go-alongs, frequently citing a desire to influence the algorithm as a motivator for these active curation practices. As such, the practices catalogued in the taxonomy presented in this chapter double as markers of algorithmic literacy, and as points at which users have the potential to exert agency over social media platform algorithms. Active curation practices as indicators of algorithmic literacy are discussed at length in Chapter 7.

In the next chapter, the observed effectiveness of active curation is discussed in regard to news and cultural commentary content that was seen by participants within the ambient journalism atmosphere of social media platforms.

Chapter 6: Cultural commentary as proxy for the news

6.1 Introduction

Having discussed the practices that young adult Australians engage in on social media platforms to actively curate their social media feeds, I now turn to the second significant theme to emerge from the data, that is, the role that cultural commentary plays as a source of information about significant public affairs on social media platforms. As discussed in Chapter 1, cultural commentary tends to be a catch-all label for informative content that does not adhere to journalistic conventions of unbiased reporting of straight facts. Within the context of social media platforms, cultural commentary content is frequently created by non-journalistic sources as a means of contributing to online discussion of topical events, through the expression of personal interpretation and judgement of the issue at hand.

The chapter explores the myriad ways in which the participants were exposed—incidentally or by design—to both traditional news and informal cultural commentary on social media during the data collection period. I argue for an expansion of what is considered to be news in the context of social media news exposure research to include the informal cultural commentary about newsworthy issues that originates from non-journalistic sources (such as celebrities, influencers, and other public figures) and everyday users of social media as this type of content is more prevalent than formal news stories on these platforms. In this respect, cultural commentary has the potential to inform users of breaking events in the same way that professional news media content does, and to therefore act as a proxy for the news media within what Hermida (2010) calls an ambient journalism environment. In my research study, cultural commentary content was prevalent on the social feeds of all participants,

including those who self-identified as news avoidant and who had engaged in active curation practices to avoid seeing news media content in their social feed.

This chapter explores the participants' consumption of, and relationship to, news and cultural commentary content on social media platforms. I argue that even where interest in professional news content on social media may be low, users are still able to keep up with trending topics and breaking news through informal content. The chapter opens with a discussion of the prevalence of both news and cultural commentary in the participants' social feeds, and how they recognised and situated these types of content. It then examines participants' motivations for both news seeking and news avoidant behaviour on social platforms, linking this to the previous chapter's discussion of algorithmic literacy and active curation practices. The chapter then moves to a discussion of cultural commentary content as a proxy for professionally produced news, before closing with an exploration of the effectiveness of active curation practices in limiting or encouraging news and cultural commentary visibility.

6.2 The prevalence of cultural commentary content on social media platforms

As discussed in previous chapters, social media platforms continue to be primarily used for maintaining social connections and for entertainment purposes although they have been increasing in popularity as a source of news media, especially for younger news audiences (Newman et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022). This focus on sociality and amusement was certainly common across the majority of participants in this project, with many stating that they preferred not to follow news organisations on specific social media platforms. For

example, Sarah commented that she specifically did not follow news media on Facebook although she was happy to follow a variety of news accounts on Twitter or Instagram.

I think Facebook, I usually don't go to it for news or anything like that. – Sarah

Georgia also did not follow news on Facebook but followed a number of news media organisations on Twitter. In her final interview, she noted that she had unconsciously separated news out of specific platforms, keeping information and entertainment separate:

I think I'm a bit more aware of the way that I've inadvertently kind of split them up. So like Twitter is much more for news than anything else is. And Instagram is much more for like, following singers and stuff like that. – Georgia

Although Lauren followed a number of news organisations on Facebook, she observed that she was seeing the majority of this kind of content on LinkedIn, attributing this difference to the industry she had moved into and the new connections she had made there:

It depends what pages you follow. So, if people in your network are sharing a lot of articles, then yes, you get a lot of news articles. But it depends on your industry, I think, because now I've linked up with so many (new) people, they're all in tech. And they like to share articles about tech, or even like stock or companies doing well, you know, anything around that. So, I do get a lot of news articles showing. – Lauren

In other cases, participants followed no professional news media accounts. Neither Chloe nor Olivia, for example, followed any news media organisations at the start of the data collection period although Chloe later added news accounts to Instagram (see also 6.2.1 below). Despite specific practices, the algorithmic recommenders on these platforms either show or hide content based on network ties, user interaction histories, as well as what is trending, and news media content therefore frequently appears alongside updates from family and friends,

celebrities, and businesses. As demonstrated below, a range of cultural commentary content from these same sources also appeared in the social feeds of all research participants, regardless of their consumptive curation practices and social feed preferences.

In this section, I present an overview of how both news and cultural commentary content was presented to the participants on social media platforms during the data collection period, with special attention paid to the cultural commentary content created by non-journalistic sources. It establishes that social media platforms can indeed be seen as a virtual public space (Papacharissi, 2002, 2008) where information and ideas can be accessed, shared, and interpreted by anyone with connectivity and an interest in socially significant information, and that this virtual public space is digitally paved with ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010, 2012) from a range of non-traditional sources.

At this point, a brief reminder is needed that this research project first analysed qualitative data about everyday user experiences with news and cultural commentary content on social media platforms, and then conducted additional quantitative analysis to test and compare the trending news topics seen on social media with what was appearing in mainstream news coverage. Participants were asked to report on newsworthy public affairs topics they had seen shared or discussed on social media between interviews, resulting in some vagueness around the source content, the platforms on which the content was seen, whether they saw news in primary or secondary posts, and who had shared or commented on the events and topics in question. As such, direct comparisons between different participants' experience was not always appropriate or indicative of overall exposure to, or interest in, news and cultural commentary content. However, a participant's reporting of current events seen on their social feeds does provide a strong indication of the extent to which trending

news topics were visible on that participant's social feeds, whether these were distributed by traditional news sources or via cultural commentary content.

6.2.1 Source content from professional news media and news-adjacent sources

For the purposes of this thesis, news media and news-adjacent sources, such as posts from individual journalists or government bodies, are grouped together here as relevant news related sources. This is due to the higher likelihood of these types of accounts directly sharing news media source content, or commenting on relevant news topics thanks to their position as subject matter experts or members of groups affected by events that are frequently covered in the media, such as social activists.

As expected, the amount of professional news media and news-adjacent content seen by informants—either during media go-alongs or reported as being seen in between interviews—varied greatly and was highly dependent on the consumptive curation practices of the individual participant. Naturally, participants who followed news media organisations or news-adjacent accounts saw more of this type of source content on their social feed and vice versa for those who did not follow news sources. The amount of news media and news-adjacent source content that participants saw on their feeds was also influenced by their overall interest in, and interaction with, this and similar content on social media. Participants who interacted with this content through paralinguistic digital affordances (PDA), commenting, or clicking through links to read a news article saw a further increase in the amount of news content that they saw. For example, Joshua and Jessica were both recommended 'sponsored' content on Facebook from news media and news-adjacent accounts in their social feed, at times from organisations that they were already following on the platform such as *The Guardian* or *BBC News*. Samantha was frequently shown 'sponsored' posts from news media organisations that she did not follow, and also saw news

content due to her social network interacting with these posts. She also noted that the type of news content she was shown tended not to be breaking news, but was either soft news or cultural commentary pieces:

That's a suggested post, Yes. And it's about a meme. (...) This is the kind of news I get. It's because other people have commented on it. Yeah, "two beers is a more effective way to ease pain". So, I get stuff like that. Obviously not serious news. It's Channel Nine news, looking for content. – Samantha

Overall, participants who were more interested in news content tended to see more news media either directly from news media or news-adjacent sources. Rebecca, who followed the most news media accounts across Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, reported the large volume of news media content she was seeing, commenting that the volume appeared to have increased after lockdowns were enforced. Rebecca herself made the connection between the amount of content she saw and the amount she interacted with:

I mean, I do read a lot of news. I wonder if they know that I read a lot of news. Like, I didn't used to read this much news. But I just feel like there's so much stuff going on in the world, and this is changing all the time. It's probably a really bad habit. (...) I did kind of notice that, yeah, there is a lot more news. (...) It's annoying. It's almost like it's not even a social media app anymore. - Rebecca

Conversely, those who did not follow news media accounts or interact with the professional news media source content shared by others in their social network saw significantly less news media and news media adjacent source content in their social feeds. Overall, the number of relevant accounts followed and the frequency of interaction with this content correlated to the amount of news media and news-adjacent content seen on the social feed. For example, Olivia did not follow any news or news-adjacent accounts and only reported

seeing a single instance of professional news media source content during the data collection period, demonstrating that the active curation practices that she engaged in were effective at dissuading news content from appearing in her social feed. Notably, Chloe eventually began actively following news media organisations on Instagram, hoping to address the lack of news she was seeing on a topic that was important to her personally. This led to an increase in news visibility on her chosen platform:

I did start following ABC News and The Guardian on Instagram. But that was because I had heard from a friend about the new COVID restrictions that were coming in, and I was just annoyed that I wasn't seeing it anywhere on the (TV) news about the new COVID restrictions. I was like, okay, no, I really need to put some more... something in my social media presence that gets me a bit more immediate news to these kind of things. Because I shouldn't actually be hearing it from other people, I should be seeing it myself. So, I started following them, and I've had a bit more news stuff popping up on my feed in Instagram. – Chloe

The most commonly reported platforms for seeing news media and news-adjacent source content were Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Reddit, with the latter being a particularly prolific platform for sharing links to news media content, either with or without further commentary from the original poster. Participants reported that Reddit's interface was particularly well suited for seeking news and further information on a trending topic; for example, a user can either view a dedicated subreddit such as R/popular, R/Australia, or R/Sydney, or by searching a hashtag or keyword. Each participant's interest in news media, as well as the type of news they were interested in, correlated with the amount of news and news-adjacent source content they were seeing on the platforms they were active on.

6.2.2 Cultural commentary within the ambient journalism environment of social media.

The correlation between interest in news and news seeking practices on social media and content exposure may be stating the obvious; nonetheless, at times it is important to state the obvious so that the less obvious can come into focus through comparison. Throughout the data collection period, participants were not asked to quantify the news they were seeing; nor were they asked questions such as “which news stories did you see on social media?” or “did you see journalists, activists, and politicians discussing topical events?” as to do so would have been to pre-determine and pre-frame what ‘news’ is. However, as per Shirky’s observation (discussed in Chapter 2), the definition of news must be adjusted in an environment where anyone with access can publish online (2008). Therefore, participants were instead asked to report which topics were trending on their social feeds, and who was involved in sharing content and commenting on these topics. In other words, participants were free to describe how they were being informed of newsworthy content on social media, and they were given the opportunity to identify what they believed should be considered informative content. In doing so, participants identified a number of non-journalistic sources of news and topical information, including commentary and analysis of news-worthy events or the social issues underlying them, providing insight into not only what, but how some participants identified news and informative content on social media platforms:

Oh, that reminds me actually, I have some TikToks that I saved that I'm going to send you, because I've seen some... not necessarily, like, news. It's like, more people kind of, you know, making... I don't know what the right word is, but kind of taking the piss out of this whole (news story). So, in a way, like, they're like a Betoota Advocate kind of satire type way of talking about it – Jessica

It is so funny, just like, sort of the memes that have taken place. And I think since our last conversation, I do find that memes are... like, they're just so funny, but it's also cultural commentary. Like, it's something in the news, and it's what people are saying, you know? – Sarah

There was a case of that TikTok'er, a girl who went missing. And I found out about that from Instagram, but I didn't understand what it was because I hadn't heard of the case. It was just saying, oh, everyone's making a fuss about this one person, why not about all the other missing people as well? And I said, okay, that's common, like, some missing victims get more attention than others. Okay. And then it kept coming up. I'm like, oh, okay. So sometimes I'll take screenshots of things because I'm not sure if it's actually news, but I hadn't heard about it. - Amy

This cultural commentary embodies ambient journalism processes (Hermida, 2010), whereby anyone from a friend or family member to a fitness influencer can contribute to the information flows about significant events and issues on social media platforms.

6.2.2.1 Identifying cultural commentary from informal sources

As discussed in Chapter 4, participants were primed to consider the idea of non-news media content being expressed through cultural commentary through the Participant Information Statement, during the initial interview, as well as throughout the data collection process. Despite this, several participants initially found this open interpretation of informative content to be challenging, and therefore the ability of participants to identify non-professional news media source content as cultural commentary content varied. However, this depended on how up-to-date with the current news events they were, and this was especially evident

during the first two scheduled interviews. That is, if a participant was not aware of a trending topic, they could skip over that content during the media go-alongs whereas I was able to identify that posts were related to a relevant news topic. At times, some participants also skipped past content they could identify as relevant during media go-alongs, reflecting their normal attention allocation practices. For example, even news-seeking Georgia rapidly scrolled past a number of posts about the guilty verdict in the Derek Chauvin murder trial on Instagram stories. However, given the sheer volume of posts on the topic that were being shared on her social feed at the time, her attention allocation became more selective:

This is an article, so, I would probably stop and go back and try and find that. One thing that I often do, if there's like heaps and heaps up the top, I will truly just flick through it and not stop and watch all of them. If it's more than like, six, I might go ehh, that's too many. Or I do like a very quick... there aren't any here that are super long, but I'll just click through them so fast that I can't see anything that's in there.-
Georgia

This type of attention allocation aligns with other news consumption behaviours with other mediums—the sheer volume of choice available from news media outlets on a major news story itself can be overwhelming, leaving aside the various commentaries appearing on the topic. Additionally, if the individual is not interested in or familiar with a topic, they may not necessarily pay attention to it on TV, radio, print, or online either.

As the interviews progressed, participants became increasingly confident in identifying other informative content, as well as more attuned to the prevalence of cultural commentary content from non-news related sources, reporting them more frequently and reflecting on how their perception of cultural commentary had changed by the time of the final interview:

I think it really made me think more about what constitutes as news. I think maybe the first couple of times that we talked, I thought it was very oh, news articles, news events. But later on, we started talking about memes more. And I think, like this video I showed you, a lot of just like, memes. A more loose definition of news and cultural events, I think. Yeah. – Sarah

Something I've noticed is paying attention to, obviously not only the content people are posting, but who is posting them. Because there's definitely certain people that I follow who are regular posters of issues, news issues, or something to do with social commentary. Like, I've got about five or six friends who, whenever there's anything kind of topical, I can count on seeing one of their posts on Instagram (about it). – Jessica

I think it made me pay much more attention to lots of stuff I was actually looking at, as opposed to just kind of mindlessly looking through it. It meant that I was being like, oh, that's something interesting, that would be good for sharing, as opposed to just being like, eh, I'm just scrolling. – Georgia

Some participants also reported engaging with the comment section of posts, either to add their own cultural commentary, to discover other perspectives and opinions on the topic, or to further understand the topic under discussion. While many participants described themselves as 'lurkers' who rarely left comments on social media posts, some participants did leave comments on posts to provide more information to the original poster, thereby contributing their own cultural commentary. For example, Emma left a comment linking to a fact-checking site on a post where someone in her social network had shared content about the Covid-19 pandemic that she believed was misinformation. Lauren commented on a post

about alleged sexual abuse by a celebrity, linking back to previous problematic content shared by the accused to provide more context to others in the discussion thread.

For others, the cultural commentary left by others was valued source information that helped them understand what other perspectives existed on a topic:

Sometimes I will go on the news tab, and I do find it quite interesting looking at the comments to see what people think. – Sarah

I will likely deep dive into the comments here and read everybody's opinion about everything. Most of the time they're interesting just to nosey at. But also, some people have an opinion that I think is wrong. – Georgia

I look at the comments there because I'm really interested in how people are feeling about different issues. – Emma

Other participants, such as Olivia, read through the comments to gain more information or understanding about the topic in discussion:

I'm not sure what's happening here. Yeah, I think for a lot of the TikToks where I don't know what's happening, I will scroll through the comments to maybe get an idea of someone else's understanding of it, that I'm not getting. – Olivia

As demonstrated in these examples, comments can be a way for everyday users to both see newsworthy information and be seen sharing it in response to the cultural commentary of other everyday users like themselves.

6.2.2.2 Satire and social news as popular sources of cultural commentary

Satire was a very popular chosen source of cultural commentary content, with the majority of participants ($n=8$) following at least one news satire account on a social media platform.

Australian satire accounts *The Betoota Advocate* and *FriendlyJordies* are both present on multiple social media platforms and were particularly popular. *FriendlyJordies* is well known as a political satirist and polemicist, frequently discussing Australian politics in his content, while *The Betoota Advocate*'s mock front-page style is more often associated with light-hearted Australian social commentary than news satire. Nonetheless, participants frequently reported seeing cultural commentary about relevant news events from the *Betoota Advocate*, especially in the months after the account fell victim to Facebook's temporary blocking of news media in Australia in response to the then proposed News Media Bargaining Code (Taylor, 2021).

The participants also reported seeing social news media in their feeds. This term refers to 'born-digital' news organisations such as *Junkee* and *Pedestrian TV* that appropriate many of the tropes of social media to present news reporting, eschewing the traditional journalistic value of balance in favour of highly opinionated and openly biased news reporting (Hurcombe et al., 2019). Not only were these not as popular as legacy news media organisations as a source of newsworthy information, they were also less popular than satire news accounts, with only a quarter of participants ($n=3$) following a social news media account.

6.2.2.3 Memes as cultural commentary

Memes constitute well established popular content on social media platforms (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017) and were similarly popular with the participants on each social platform. Memes as cultural commentary are effective in

part thanks to their ability to “highlight affect, political views, reactions, key information, and scenes of importance” through the use of humour or shared cultural framing (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 48). Almost half of the participants ($n=6$) reported following dedicated meme accounts or being members of meme groups on social media, particularly on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, and TikTok. Some of these meme accounts and groups were dedicated to cultural commentary on topical events in the news, such as the *ALP Spicy Meme Stash* account on Facebook, or @sainthoax on Instagram. Others were accounts or pages centred on general, humorous memes on a theme or topic.

However, participants did not need to actively follow accounts or participate in dedicated groups to come across memes providing cultural commentary. All 13 participants either shared memes featuring cultural commentary that they had seen in between interviews, or highlighted memes that they came across during the media go-alongs. No topic was off limits, with memes seen mocking the death of Prince Phillip, sexual assault allegations against Prince Andrew, and police killings in the United States, as well as other trending topics such as the ship *Ever Given* running aground in the Suez Canal, the resignation of NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, and the Tokyo Summer Olympics. Predictably, given the data collection period, the memes provided various commentaries on the Covid-19 pandemic such as lockdowns, vaccination, and the easing of movement restrictions.

6.2.2.4 Hot takes and call outs

A popular form of cultural commentary seen in the participant interviews was the ‘hot take’. A hot take has been described as “a quickly produced, strongly worded, and often deliberately provocative or sensational opinion or reaction” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Hot takes can be humorous, satirical, fantastical, or serious, depending on the topic that the hot take references and the commentator sharing it. Some hot takes appeared as memes on the

participant's accounts, frequently in the format of the Twitter screenshot-as-meme, as described in Chapter 1.

Elsewhere, a range of non-journalistic sources shared their own serious hot takes on various social platforms, and these sources ranged from friends and family members to influencers and business leaders. Hot takes were particularly common in discussions of the Australian Federal and NSW state government's approaches to managing the Covid-19 pandemic through movement restrictions and their vaccination strategies, as well as in commentary of social issues underlying trending news topics. I observed hot takes in the social feeds of every participant in the study, and these frequently appeared as additional user commentary in a secondary post or 're-share'. Overall, participants appeared to allocate attention to these personal commentaries more frequently than they did for more mundane social media posts even if they did not always agree with the opinions being expressed:

I like to hear people's hot takes on football and whether or not they think that anything is better than anything else. And nobody ever agrees. But it's interesting to see why people are wrong, you know. – Georgia

Along with the hot take, the call out was also frequently seen on the participants' social feeds. The call out originates in American Black vernacular where it is used by Black women to critique systemic inequality such as racism and misogyny although it has since been appropriated by other online users to indicate any kind of online criticism directed at an individual or entity, whether warranted or not (Bouvier, 2020; Clark, 2020; Highfield, 2017; Nakamura, 2015). In this way, call outs have often been confused or conflated with 'cancelling' which Clark describes as "an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money" (2020, p. 88). Call

outs tend to be a contested activity on social media, with activists such as Ross (2019) commenting that they can be used to target specific individuals for social issues that are perpetuated by the many and may at times be used as a mechanism for personal vengeance rather than to better society through accountability. However, the call out can also be seen as an effective mechanism for non-journalistic sources to bring much-needed attention to problematic behaviours from governments, brands, and business entities where minority voices may be drowned out by the narratives generated by these larger organisations (Gerrie, 2019; Highfield, 2017; Lawson, 2021; Nakamura, 2015). For example, both Lauren and Samantha reported seeing call outs from influencer accounts on the behaviour of Alex Williamson which had first alerted them to the allegations against the Australian comedian (discussed further in Chapter 7).

Cultural commentary content that called out problematic behaviour or systemic issues was particularly prevalent for participants who used Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. A small number of participants went so far as to specifically follow ‘call out’ accounts on these platforms, such as @dietprada, @esteelaundry, @celeb_spellcheck, and @BrandsOwned. These accounts were popular with participants who were interested in social justice issues and, along with the hot take, have been credited by these participants with keeping them informed of systemic inequality in different industries that they would otherwise not be made aware of by the mainstream media. The hot take and the call out as cultural commentary in an ambient journalism environment can be seen as a manifestation of Dutton’s (2009) concept of the fifth estate, where the Internet hosts a network of individuals who are able to collectively hold powerful entities to account. This concept will be expanded on further in Chapter 7.

6.2.2.5 Informal cultural commentary as breaking news forerunner

Cultural commentary from informal sources can perform the role of alerting everyday users to breaking news. Participants in this study noted that they became aware of some breaking news because of the out-of-context commentary posts they were seeing from friends, family, celebrities, and influencers on a range of social platforms. Olivia, for example—who reported actively avoiding news on social media platforms—commented that she generally did not see news related content or commentary on her social media feed; however, during major events in the news cycle her feed would ‘blow up’ with commentary, as it did after the murder of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020. During her final interview in late November 2021, Olivia reported that she had learnt about the accusations against Kyle Rittenhouse and his just-announced not guilty verdict from an Instagram account:

I first heard about the Rittenhouse trials because there's a spider account (that) posted something. (...) So I was confused. And then I went and searched up "What did Kyle Rittenhouse do", and then I was just like, oh, he killed two people? He killed two people! He went into a protest with a gun and shot two people! I was quite shocked. I was like America, what are you doing? – Olivia

Other participants also commented that they had learnt about breaking events in similar ways, such as the high level of commentary on Twitter about ADHD alerting Georgia to a news story about politician Anthony Laming. Amy learned about the resignation of NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian from a personal friend commenting on her departure on Facebook, and Sarah learned of the death of Prince Phillip from a supercut²² of Twitter memes shared on TikTok. Overall, the majority of participants ($n=9$) reported learning about a breaking news

²² The term ‘supercut’ refers to a video format that presents “the aesthetic of assembling appropriated footage into a matching list of clips” (Tohline, 2021). The term was originally coined by blogger Andy Baio in 2008.

event from social media, either from secondary posts that included news media source content, or from the cultural commentary of friends, family, influencers, and celebrities that they followed. This is a testament to how pervasive the ambient news environment on social media can be for some users, and how everyday users can be incidentally exposed to breaking news on social media.

6.2.2.6 Major news events as drivers of informal cultural commentary

Although at times participants were alerted to breaking news through informal cultural commentary, content from non-news related sources was overwhelmingly described by participants as commentary on topics that were already trending in the news. This commentary frequently contained only original source content from these non-news sources (such as a hot take), while other commentary contained primary or secondary posts that linked to, and which commented on, news media and news-related source content. Notably, almost all of the participants ($n=12$) commented on seeing at least some of this type of content on their social feeds, despite not following news media, journalists, activists, or political accounts themselves. This was usually attributed to the significant events that were occurring in the news media throughout 2021 and early 2022, particularly the Australian national and state news in relation to Covid restrictions and lockdowns and the sexual assault accusations in the Australian federal parliament, as well as global news events such as the mass and police shootings in the United States, the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the murder of Sarah Everard in the UK, the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

While these major events boosted the amount of news media and news related source content seen by the participants, cultural commentary from non-news related sources was by far the most commonly reported content for all users during the data collection period. For

example, Chloe noticed a significant amount of commentary on TikTok about the shooting of Duante Wright by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as well as about the mass shooting of predominantly Asian victims at a spa in Atlanta, Georgia—and this was from a range of accounts—but she did not see anyone commenting on or sharing news of either topic in her Facebook or Instagram social feeds. Meanwhile, Amy was surprised that she was learning more about changes to Covid restrictions in NSW from the restaurant and café accounts she followed on Instagram than from the news sources she regularly checked in with online, and that she actually preferred this to journalistic reporting:

There was this one place, this one pub that's near my workplace, they're actually giving out advice on how to get your proof of double vaccinations. (...) because this, unfortunately, this is how I get all the important updates on all the changes. (...) Because I'm on Instagram, so I slow down to see if there's anything I might have missed. Because it's just too hard following the news. I guess with the news, they can't give you practical advice on how to apply it. It's more like this is what the government has told us. Because that's the main point of journalism, but it's... I can't, it's too confusing. – Amy

Echoing Amy's sentiments, Joshua also commented on his preference for learning more about a developing issue from informal sources on TikTok, noting its ability to both explain news as well as connect him to issues he might not see reported on by professional news media:

I think TikTok is a really powerful platform, because it allows young people like me to understand things. Like, I'll go on there, spend 20 minutes on there, and you can learn a lot about current political events, global events, but things you didn't know they were happening. Like bills moving through Parliament, or petitions being sat at

the moment or stuff you don't see or that may not get the attention mainstream media got. (...) Or you might see actual content from young people that may not even... you wouldn't see it on Facebook, it's like the algorithm you see on Facebook, you don't really see things, or it might be too offensive for Facebook. But it creates circles, (...) and you'll see things. Like, I can go on there and I see things on commuting into Western Sydney, or different parts of Australia. Like, Indigenous people making content in different parts of Australia. And you connect to it, that you wouldn't get here. I don't get that on Facebook or Instagram. So that's why I come back to TikTok. You like something, or you see something and you go, oh, actually, that's really interesting. I'll follow them. Or you just save the video, download the video, and then play it again and send it to people. – Joshua

While this may be unsurprising given that social media has always been seen as a medium through which everyday users are able to share their opinions on any range of topics (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Whiting & Williams, 2013), many research studies about news on social media fail to capture this type of ambient citizen journalism and do not situate it within the “news communication ecosystem” (Shirky, 2008, p. 66) of everyday users. By including cultural commentary content in future studies of news on social media, our understanding of how news consumers experience informative content on these platforms can be expanded.

6.2.2.7 Cultural commentary bolstering the long tail of news on social media.

In 2004, *Wired* published an article explaining the digitally enabled long tail business model (Anderson, 2004). In this article, Anderson argued that the Internet allowed for even the most niche of interests and needs to be met due to the Internet's searchability and its capability of warehousing content on servers rather than in physically limited spaces such as stores or newspapers, or in time-constraining spaces such as broadcast TV or radio. To take a

contemporary example, if an individual wanted to listen to Australian indie band The Underground Lovers' 1994 album *Dream it Down*, they no longer had to hunt around in a physical store with limited shelf space for a physical copy of the niche band's album but could simply purchase a digital copy online. Since then, the concept of the long tail has been increasingly included in discussions of news on social media, where the audience for niche news is large (see Agarwal et al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2016; Sjøvaag & Kvalheim, 2019; Smyrnaio et al., 2010), even though the concept of the long tail has been largely disproved in the operation of mainstream media industries (Elberse, 2014).

For many of the participants in this research study, both the long tail and dominant mainstream news topics were observed or reported in their social feeds. All of the participants described seeing news or cultural commentary content about topics on major trending events, as discussed above. Comparing the topics that participants reported having seen in their social feeds with the Australian edition of *The Guardian* for the same time periods shows that participants overwhelmingly saw news and cultural commentary content that aligned with news reported in the Australian national media. Of the 212 instances of topics reported during the data collection period (see Table 4-3 for a sample of topics), almost three-quarters ($n=156$, 73.6%) were reported in the Australian national media at the time. Of the 56 topics that were not, a search on Google—filtered for 'news' for a time period extending one week after the relevant interview—resulted in a further 51 of these topics (24%) linking to Australian national media, local news media within Australia, international media, or niche media outlets for specific industries that participants were connected to. In each of these cases, the news or commentary was of particular interest to the individual participant due to their interest in, or personal connection to, the topic. These included harder news stories such as the investigation into sexual assault allegations at Activision Blizzard in California and the legislative changes to abortion rights being proposed in Texas, as well as

hyper-local news relevant to specific communities such as local council elections in NSW. Also included were other softer news and commentary on celebrities, sporting events, and the upcoming release of merchandise or entertainment products such as films, games, music, or tours. The remaining five topics (2.4%) were easily linked to major news events that had taken place in the preceding weeks and months, such as the allegations against Australian politician Christian Porter or the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in the United States, which were not being reported on during the period of inquiry.

That one-quarter of topics mentioned were more specifically of interest to individual participants is notable and contextualises the motivations for the news seeking or news avoidance preferences of each person: Sarah, Georgia, Alex, and Olivia, for instance, had a particular interest in niche entertainment such as anime, games, and music; Georgia, Rebecca, and Joshua were seeking out cultural commentary from Indigenous voices; Jessica, Lauren, Samantha, and Emma invited content on feminism, women's issues, and mental health; Jessica, Sarah, Chloe, and Lauren were keeping up-to-date with hyperlocal news; and Stephanie, Amy, and Alex were particularly interested in Covid-19 related information specific to their movement needs. Additionally, participants' individual interests in sports, animal rights, local politics, and cryptocurrency were also catered to via news or cultural commentary content. As Alex reflected in their final interview, this material appeared because they went looking for it:

Because I went hunting around for stuff. You think they're a niche, you think your interest is a niche interest, then you find out 3 million people have that interest. And then you go and find further. You're like, well, actually, within this niche interest, there are sub niches and sub niches and sub niches, you just keep going. And there's

like an endless community that doesn't stop, and you can bend it the way you want it to bend. – Alex

Like Alex, many of the participants reflected on how social media platforms connected them to their interests, and how they might gain new information from these platforms about emerging issues in these various areas. This is perhaps fundamental to the appeal of social media platforms, with news and cultural commentary presented through these myriad lenses becoming more meaningful to the individual via personalised feeds.

As has been argued in this section, the participants in this study were exposed to news and cultural commentary from a wide range of sources, including both journalistic and non-journalistic sources, with informal cultural commentary content often acting as a proxy for professional news media source content. In the next section, I discuss the relationship between participant preferences, active curation, and news and cultural commentary content on social media.

6.3 Active curation for news and cultural commentary

As has been demonstrated in the preceding sections, every participant in this study was exposed to at least some cultural commentary content on social media platforms, regardless of whether they were news seeking or news avoidant in this context. This finding is significant as it shows that newsworthy cultural commentary reaches even self-proclaimed news avoidant participants (such as Chloe and Olivia) who successfully curate their feeds to avoid news content as much as possible.

In the previous chapter, I established links between a user's motivations for using different social media platforms, how they consumptively curate their social feeds, and what they expect to see on them. As the findings above demonstrate, this relationship between

motivation, curation, and expectation can be directly mapped to experiences with news and cultural commentary on social media platforms. That is, if a user is motivated to seek out news on social media, their curatorial practices will include actions that invite news onto the social feed, and they will expect to see this kind of content on these platforms. Conversely, if the user's motivations align with reserving social media as spaces for interpersonal connections and entertainment, their curatorial practices will mitigate against traditional news content appearing in their feed, and they will not expect to see it there. Active curation practices—such as following news media or news-adjacent accounts, interacting with news content, or interacting with content display—will increase the likelihood of the user seeing news media source content on their feed, whereas unfollowing such accounts, hiding content, or allocating no attention to/not interacting with content will decrease the likelihood that it will be seen. For some participants, this was one of the reasons that they engaged in social media—that is, to learn about news and breaking information on topics that were of interest to them—and they curated their feeds to ensure that this kind of content was encouraged.

While this relationship between motivation, curation, and expectation can be mapped to news seeking and news avoiding preferences on social media, it is important to note that the way in which each of these three aspects of user agency operates is not universal. That is, the very limited definition of news as described in Chapter 2 is why cultural commentary content is still able to penetrate even the most news-avoidant user's social feed.

Firstly, each user will have different motivations and expectations for each of the social media platforms that they use, and these motivations for using a specific platform are not universal. For example, while one user may have a preference for seeing news media content on Facebook and expects to see it there, another may wish to use this platform exclusively for maintaining social connections, or for any other purpose that appeals to them.

Secondly, as described in Chapter 5, algorithmic literacy and knowledge of social media platform affordances vary from user to user, leading to different curatorial practices being enacted by each, with motivation and expectation once again playing a role in how actively a user may wish to curate their feed. If a user feels that their curation practice is effective, they will expect that engaging in curation will have predictable outcomes and therefore engage in it more frequently. Finally, each individual user will have different preferences for news and cultural commentary content on their social media feed, with some participants in the study, such as Stephanie and Joshua, stating that they actively preferred to get cultural commentary content from non-journalistic sources rather than professional news media content. In other words, a user may be motivated to invite cultural commentary into their feed through satire or from influencers who are aligned with a range of social issues but not from news media organisations and journalists, or even not at all.

Contrasting examples of news seeking and news avoidance practices are provided by Lauren and Olivia. Lauren was particularly interested in seeing news on social media and enjoyed cultural commentary content on Instagram. In late February 2021, Facebook temporarily blocked access to news content in Australia, as well as content from some government and not for profit accounts (Leaver, 2021). During this news outage, Lauren commented on her realisation that Facebook had come to define her news consumption practices:

One of the big things I do on Facebook is look at media articles, and things like that. So, when that got pulled down for a few days, I didn't really go on Facebook much, I kind of found it quite boring. And I think it was kind of good as well, I noticed because you weren't being thrown these constant updates, bad news, bad news, bad news. So, in a way, it was good. But on the flip side, other than my daily check of the news in

the morning, I was also missing a lot of stuff, because I wasn't checking my Facebook constantly throughout the day and getting those news updates. So, I relied more on like the Nine news app, I had to go and find it myself. – Lauren

On the other hand, Olivia—who was the most social media news avoidant participant in the study—was highly engaged with social media, having multiple accounts on both TikTok and Instagram, curating content on each feed to cater to her specific interests. Olivia stated that she curated multiple accounts as a means of escapism, with social media as her place to go for distracting, light, and entertaining content. Shortly after commencing the interviews for this study, Olivia experienced a prolonged medical issue that saw her bedridden for a significant part of the data collection period. She reported that she was spending far more time on social media as a result of this immobility and due to her low energy levels. And yet, even with significantly more time spent on social media, Olivia still only reported a single instance of news media or news adjacent source content coming through on her feed during this time, and this was a clip from a Chinese language news program discussing accusations against a K-Pop singer, which was shared by a K-Pop related account on TikTok.

Nonetheless, she did occasionally see cultural commentary content coming through, such as the example mentioned in section 6.2.2.5 above around the verdict in the Kyle Rittenhouse trial. She also reported that big newsworthy issues generally ‘blew up’ on her social feed through cultural commentary content. Thus, while she was not actively seeking it, informal information about current events would still make its way into her social feed, and importantly, this was not always unwelcome.

These examples demonstrate how Lauren and Olivia were motivated to use specific social media platforms in certain ways, for example, for information gathering and entertainment. Moreover, they both consumptively curated their social feeds to encourage the

content they wanted to see, and expected to see that kind of content on the platform mixed in with other typical social media content. Lauren's Facebook feed was not solely dedicated to news media content, and Olivia was not annoyed by the intrusion of cultural commentary on a breaking news story on her Instagram feed. Perhaps given the prevalence of cultural commentary on social media from all sources, none of the participants reported that this type of informative content was unexpected on social media. If anything, participants knew they had the option to unfollow, hide, or simply not allocate attention to any accounts or commentary they did not want to see.

After Chloe started following news media accounts on Instagram, I asked her if she would continue following these accounts once the issue she wanted to follow was no longer trending. She stated that she might, depending on what other content the accounts shared, and whether it would remain interesting to her. In our final interview, I asked her to reflect on her experiences participating in the project, and she responded:

Now that I've paid attention to it, I've definitely been like, oh, I should probably be trying to work the algorithm to feed some more important stuff in there. But also, I wonder... I don't know... if my feed was permeated with more important stuff, how much attention would I actually pay to it? – Chloe

Ultimately—as Chloe can attest to—while news and cultural commentary may be present on social media in many forms, attention allocation will always remain the deciding factor on whether content is available but ignored, or valued and consumed.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for an expanded definition of what is considered news in social media research to include the informal cultural commentary that originates from everyday

users of social media, celebrities, influencers, and other public figures. This type of content can act to either inform everyday users of breaking news events or to provide personal interpretations of events and their relevance to relevant social issues. Cultural commentary content on social media—along with news shared from professional news media sources—can create an environment of ambient journalism that is able to reach even news avoidant users of these platforms. This chapter has also highlighted the role that everyday users and other non-journalistic sources play in the two-step flow of information on social media platforms, and has demonstrated how an individual user's consumptive curation practices are able to successfully influence—but not entirely eliminate—the amount of news and cultural commentary content that they see based on their preferences and curatorial practices.

In the next chapter, I will further discuss the implications of findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 on how news media is consumed, produced, and studied on social media platforms, as well as the emergence of these platforms and their users as the embodiment of Dutton's (2009) concept of the fifth estate.

Chapter 7: The news I want: Re-centring the user in algorithmic recommender systems

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the key findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6, framing active curation practices and experiences with cultural commentary content in broader contexts. In doing so, I contribute to the ongoing debate about the role that social media platforms play as gatekeepers of—and gateways to—information (Bruns, 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Kaiser et al., 2018; Martin & Dwyer, 2019; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Napoli, 2019; Swart, 2021; Thurman et al., 2019; Wunderlich et al., 2022). I also shift the focus onto the central role that social media users play in this dynamic.

I argue here that more scholarly works should emphasise the role of the individual user in discussions of recommender processes on social media platforms, especially those relating to news exposure, and accordingly I propose using the term ‘customisation’ of the social feed rather than ‘personalisation’ to distinguish between user and algorithm centred studies. I also contend that curation of the social feed can lead users to public sphericules where cultural commentary contributes to public debate and the formation of public opinion, and that this engagement enables users to participate in accountability mechanisms that are characteristics of the fifth estate (Dutton, 2009).

The chapter begins with my theoretical framing of active curation practices as they relate to algorithmic literacy and individual user motivations, and then proceed to present the arguments outlined above.

In this thesis, I set out to investigate the role of the everyday user in curating newsworthy content within information flows on algorithmically mediated social media platforms. In Chapter 5, I establish the concepts of active and passive curation as a useful frame for understanding how everyday users situate themselves and their practices within algorithmic recommendation processes on social media platforms. In Chapter 6, I drew attention to the diversity of cultural commentary from non-journalistic sources that conforms to platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015); these include memes, hot takes, and satire, which act as a proxy for professional news content within the ambient journalism environment of social media platforms (Hermida, 2010, 2012). In Chapter 6, I also highlighted how this cultural commentary content was still present on social feeds even after users enacted curation practices designed to minimise news visibility. Thus, in Chapters 5 and 6, I addressed the primary and secondary research questions of this thesis by drawing out dominant themes that emerged through the data collection process, describing the news experiences of research participants within their own social media practices.

I will now focus on a higher level of analysis of these practices, starting with an overview of my theorisation of ‘active curation’ as a means for everyday users to shape their consumption of news on social media.

7.2 Active curation as response to algorithmic recommender systems

A significant theme to emerge from the findings is the critical role the user has in shaping their social feed. Social media platforms present uniform interfaces and affordances to all of their users and each platform algorithm’s logic is applied to all of these users equally. Nevertheless, each of this study’s participants had different experiences with their social feeds, and this differentiation, which is frequently referred to as personalisation, was a result of each participant’s active and passive curation practices. Participants’ individual practices

were enacted in response to their understanding of the recommender algorithms populating their social feeds, as well as their preferences for how much and what kind of topical and socially relevant content they wanted to see in their social feeds, and which sources they preferred to see this content from.

The discussion of these themes in Chapters 5 and 6 was framed within the context of the research participants' experiences in this project, and provided a 'moment in time' study of these everyday users, their curation practices on social media platforms, and the effect of these practices on their individual experiences with information flows.

The curation practices outlined in Chapter 5—both affordance and attention allocation driven—were identified either through direct observation of participants or through participants reporting on their usual practices during interviews and media go-alongs. During the interviews, I frequently invited participants to reflect on why they were engaging in the actions they were taking, and how they perceived the effectiveness and utility of each action. It is unsurprising that the majority of participants ($n=9$) initially found it challenging to articulate their motivations, frequently stating that they had not really thought about it before. By virtue of participating in this study and as the interviews progressed, they became more aware of the relationship between their actions and their experiences with social media platforms. Through this reflection, their algorithmic literacy improved on three of the AMCA-scale dimensions: content filtering, automated decision-making, and human-algorithm interplay (Zarouali et al., 2021, p. 3).

Nonetheless, not all of the practices described in Chapter 5 were observed for every participant in the cohort; nor did all of the participants articulate their understanding of the different dynamics at play within the algorithmic recommender system during this time. Even where multiple participants had an account on the same platform, their practices and

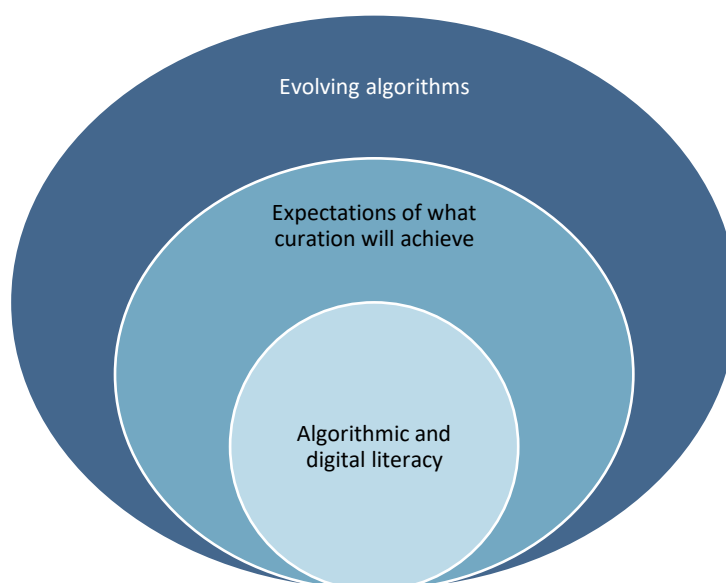
experiences varied along with their motivations for using the platform itself or for engaging with a specific affordance. Thus, while the platform interface and affordances may be universally presented to everyday users, curation practices and system experiences are personal, and driven by the individual user's agency and knowledge. While this phenomenon is frequently described as algorithmic personalisation on social media platforms, I argue that it can, and should, also be described as 'customisation' through curation practices. Both personalisation and customisation refer to the same dynamic of recommender algorithms responding to individual user activity; yet, personalisation gives primacy to the power of the algorithm to shape information whereas customisation gives primacy to the agency of individual users who seek to modify this algorithmic output. By centring on the individual user, their practices, and their unique perspectives, media researchers can more effectively explore the complex relationships that exist between the users and 'their' algorithms, which I argue further in section 7.3 below.

The extent of customisation possible in any system will of course vary depending on the individual user and their understanding of the logics of platform algorithms in shaping the social feed. However, in the context of this study, variances in digital and algorithmic literacy—that is, knowledge of specific platform affordances and an understanding of algorithmic filtering processes—were not the only drivers of participant practices.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in this thesis I have taken the position that algorithms are experience technologies—users are informed about potential forms of agency in part by their use of various platforms, as well as from information gained from other users, or self-directed learning of the topic (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Willson, 2017). I argue that as experiences with recommender systems on social media platforms increase a user's algorithmic literacy, this literacy becomes the core driver for engaging in active curation practice. Both

algorithmic literacy and active curation practices are further shaped by the user's expectations of algorithmic performance, that is, the effect they expect their practices to have on the content they see in their social feed. However, these expectations are in constant tension with recommender algorithms, which frequently change and evolve over time. Every time a platform updates its recommender algorithm, the user will also need to review and update their curation practices to engage more actively in the practices that they deem to be more effective within the updated recommender system. Figure 7-1 illustrates this relationship within the larger context of ever-evolving algorithms, where the user's expectations of what consumptive curation practices will achieve is shaped by their algorithmic literacy, with literacy as core driver for active curation practices. This is evidenced through some of the participant quotes presented in Chapter 5, where participants described their motivations for liking or commenting on content as a means of "telling" or "teaching" the algorithm what they want to see more of, and is also discussed further below.

Figure 7-1: Drivers of Active Curation Practices



In Figure 7-2:below, I plot the AMCA-scale score for each participant discussed in Chapter 4. These scores are designed to evaluate the participants' algorithmic literacy and are

measured based on the number of active curation practices that participants engaged in during the study. This graph shows that participants with higher levels of algorithmic literacy tended to engage in a greater number of active curation practices.

Figure 7-2: Active Curation Use and Algorithmic Literacy within Participant Cohort

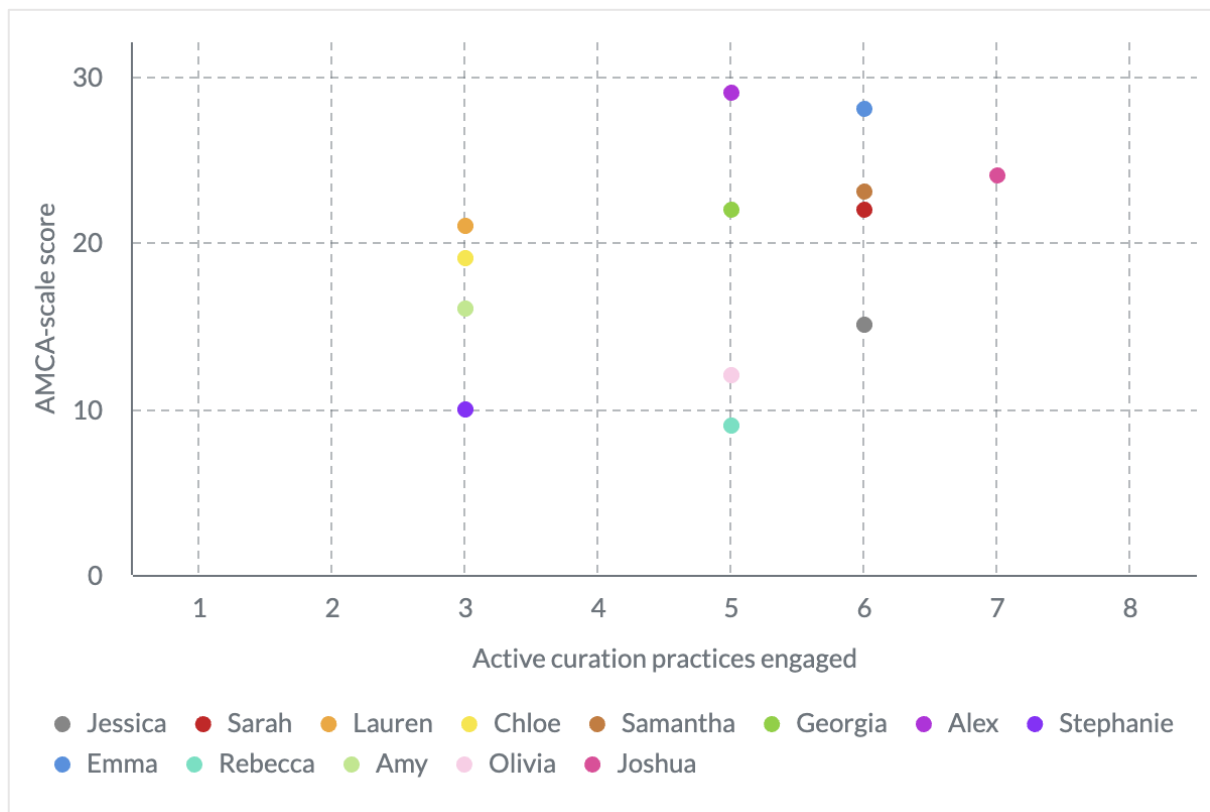
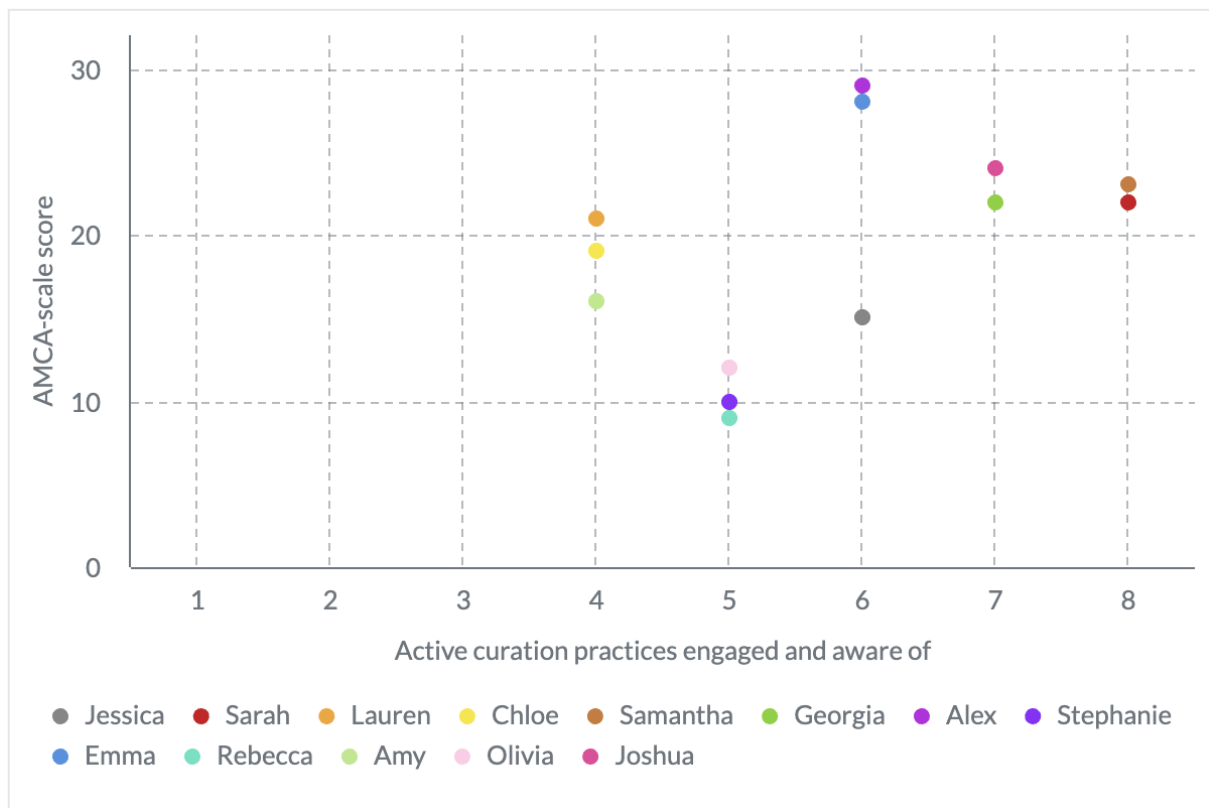


Figure 7-3: below also plots the participants' AMCA-scale scores, this time measured with respect to their *awareness* of practices that could help curate their social feed. Awareness includes those practices I observed participants actively engaging in during the study as well as those practices that participants discussed but did not engage in, such as the availability of keyword blocking, or knowing that they can unfollow accounts but choosing not to. By including practices that participants are aware of but choose not to engage in, a stronger correlation between the range of active curation practices and algorithmic literacy is detected.

Both of these figures highlight that knowledge of curation practices does not always result in engagement with them; instead, participants enact agency through their decisions about when to curate their feed, and when to let the recommender algorithms curate it for them.

Figure 7-3: Active Curation Practice Awareness and Algorithmic Literacy



This contrast between user awareness of actions that can help them curate their social feeds and the actions they actively take to do so also brings to the fore a tension that exists for algorithmically literate participants: between using and enjoying these social media platforms for what they are, and needing to constantly consider whether their actions and activity will produce a social feed they are happy with.

Variations in cohort motivation and expectation can be seen in the quotes included in Chapter 5. Most participants demonstrated that they knew about different affordances that could be used to invite content into, or dissuade it out of, their social feeds, but did not

always choose to engage with these. For example, some participants did not bother to report offensive comments to Twitter due to the perceived futility of reporting content, that is, they were not seeing the platform company act on reports as they had anticipated. Moreover, some participants considered the impact that unfollowing a social contact might have on their offline relationships, which led some to hide or mute the offending account instead, or simply not allocate attention to it. In addition, while some participants knew that they could review advert target settings to understand why they had been shown an ad as well as to adjust these settings, this was not motivation enough for participants like Georgia to act on even though her target categorisation was incorrect. In general, while participants knew that many of their actions had an effect on what they saw on their social feeds, this knowledge did not always result in a desire to curate the feed, with some participants instead opting to see more content diversity from algorithmic recommendation (see for example quotes from Amy, Sarah, and Georgia in Chapter 5).

As stated in Chapter 5, the majority of participants ($n=11$) expressed that they were happy with the process of content discovery on various platforms, that is, they were positive about the content that the platform algorithm recommended to them—demonstrating that an overly curated feed was not always desirable. In other instances, participants stated that they only interacted with paralinguistic digital affordances (PDAs) on accounts of friends or family, while others only liked or favourited content from creators on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Yet, in both instances, the participants were motivated to do so in the expectation that the algorithm would then increase the amount of content seen from these accounts. Arguably, motivation and expectation play a more important role in the active curation processes of participants than algorithmic literacy alone. Indeed, some participants were more motivated to curate their social feeds than others.

Active curation as a process was perhaps best articulated by Emma who noted the effort she had put in to ‘training’ the Instagram algorithm:

My training of the algorithm is going well. I found lots of accounts that are similar to my art style, so I’ve been slowly training it to show me more of those. And I found quite a few, which is fun. I’m following lots of poets as well, because that’s really good for ideas to draw. – Emma

When I asked if she felt that she had to invest a lot of time in training the algorithm to present content she wanted to see, Emma responded:

Yeah, absolutely. Every time I use the app I try and find another account with the same style and you know, spam like them or message them or comment on their stuff or share their stuff and that sort of stuff. It takes probably a good three to four days of constantly doing that for it to start recommending things in your search area, like the Explore page. And because I actually almost considered just starting an entirely new account, because of the accounts that were interested in my account when I started following them back, just out of you know, building my account, not necessarily being interested, not that it was actually any good artwork. So then unfortunately my explore page was just full of really terrible stuff that I didn’t like at all. And I was like, okay, maybe I should start again. But you know, after about a week or so it’s finally turning around. – Emma

Emma’s comments also speak to the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017) of the cohort, as discussed in Chapter 5, with many of the participants in this study personifying algorithms as anthropomorphic entities (Colbjørnsen, 2018) that could be ‘trained’ to be better personal assistants through active curation practices.

Although algorithmic literacy, motivation, and expectation are key drivers for active curation practices, these practices are at their core a response to the platform algorithms that determine what content users are exposed to on social media platforms, especially in the absence of a chronological social feed option. Each curation practice listed in this study is enacted with an expectation of a specific result based on previous experience with it—that is, the classic analogy of the algorithm as a ‘black box’, where only the actions a user takes (input) and the results that they see (output) can be determined since access to algorithmic code is inaccessible (Pasquale, 2015)—forming the algorithmic imaginary of what the user perceives as the function of algorithms to be (discussed at length by Bucher, see 2012; 2017, 2018).

However, platform algorithms are prone to frequent updates and changes, which are initiated to address bugs or problematic code (Chowdhury, 2021; Yee et al., 2021), or to reprioritise content based on new business objectives (Hern, 2022; Leaver, 2021; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018; Yu & Tas, 2015; Zuckerberg, 2018). Not only can these changes occur at any time, but they can change the effectiveness or utility of the consumptive curation practices, as catalogued in Chapter 5. As such, the practices described in that chapter act as a moment-in-time snapshot of what was being used during the data collection period, based on algorithmic priorities that existed at that time and how the participants understood them. How these practices might change over time in a response to both algorithmic priorities along with platform interface and affordance changes presents an opportunity for future study.

The prevalence of an algorithmically curated social feed as the only option users have for viewing content on social media platforms has necessitated a more active curation process for users. If platforms did not have these algorithmic timelines, users would be presented with a chronological feed of content from all of the accounts that they follow, and the need to

negotiate with platform algorithms to shape the feed might dissipate or evaporate entirely. In the context of a chronological timeline, the practices of attention allocation, following accounts, and unfollowing or hiding accounts or content might be enough to sufficiently curate the social feed to satisfy an individual user's interests and preferences. The need to either encourage or discourage specific content from being featured on the feed is attributable to control over visibility being solely with the platform recommender algorithms. Within a chronological feed, the user is theoretically able to access all of the content from followed accounts within a single feed even if this means an immense amount of content to scroll through. In such cases, algorithmic personalisation would be relegated to advertising and 'suggested' accounts, where platforms are able to draw on the same data points to create personalised profiles of their users to target advertising more effectively. This is not to say that I believe the algorithmic feed should be abolished, or that participants within the study have called for this—as stated above, all except two of the cohort participants ($n=11$) explicitly stated that they were happy with or enjoyed the content recommendations made to them by the platform recommender systems. Algorithmic recommendation on social media platforms has its place; however, my findings demonstrate that its existence calls for users to enact more conscious practices to ensure the algorithms are working in their interests.

7.3 Personalisation or customisation? Re-centring the user in algorithmic recommender systems

As an initial point of inquiry, I posed the primary research question: "How and why do users curate access to news on social media platforms through their consumption practices?" I raised this question in response to a range of scholarly works in the field of media and communications, particularly critical algorithm studies, that centre on the recommender algorithm as both gateway to—and gatekeeper of—information flows on social media

platforms. These works have been fundamental to our understanding of the impact of automated decision-making on society, where algorithms have been employed across a wide range of contexts and settings from banking and finance to law and order, as well as media and communication technology (Andrejevic, 2019; Pasquale, 2015). Studies in this field have examined the role of algorithms in our current lives—their ubiquity, their complexity, and secrecy—and have raised questions regarding the consequences of information discovery being led by automated systems, which highlights many concerning issues that we as a society continue to grapple with, such as automated biases, platform governance, personal media use, and the polarisation of audiences (see for example Andrejevic, 2019; Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Just & Latzer, 2017; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Noble, 2018; Pariser, 2011b; Pasquale, 2015; Seaver, 2018). These, and many other works in the field, have established the critical role that algorithms play in shaping information flows, with social media platforms being of particular relevance to news media flows (Bruns, 2018; Martin & Dwyer, 2019; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Park et al., 2022; Swart, 2021; Wunderlich et al., 2022).

Critical algorithm studies have enhanced our understanding of how these automated decision-makers are programmed, where they can be located in processes that impact daily life, and what the potential consequences are of private entities continuing to use algorithms within these contexts. Flawed as they may be, algorithms continue to be central to the management of the vast amounts of content available online, and individual users are increasingly less likely to be able to avoid algorithmic intervention when accessing content in online spaces. The previously discussed shift away from platforms providing chronological timelines provides a good example of these issues.

While attention must still be paid to the role of algorithms in recommending content to users, the findings I have presented in this thesis regarding active and passive curation practices suggest that a shift in our approach to studying recommender systems may be called for. Currently, much of the critical algorithm studies literature centres on the algorithm, and in doing so it has inadvertently reinforced the narrative that everyday users are mostly passive end receivers of algorithmic processes. That is, the arguments suggest that users exist in filter bubbles due to algorithms recommending personalised content to them (Pariser, 2011b), they are shown results that reinforce biased stereotypes when using search engines (Noble, 2018), or they are fed personalised content to trap them into spending longer on a social media platform (Seaver, 2018). By focusing on what the algorithm is doing, everyday users are rendered as two dimensional beings that are interchangeable with each other, experiencing platforms and the content on them in more or less similar ways.

In this thesis, therefore, I put forward an argument for changing the language for user-centric approaches to recommender processes on social media platforms away from algorithmic *personalisation* (focus on the algorithm) to algorithmic *customisation* (focus on the user). The term *personalisation* has become synonymous with algorithmic-centred approaches (Eskens et al., 2017; Just & Latzer, 2017; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Pariser, 2011b; Sunstein, 2018; Thurman et al., 2019), which suggests that the platform algorithm selects content for a ‘personalised’ experience based on the user’s profile, previous actions on the platform, and other data gleaned from 3rd party apps where available. I suggest *customisation* as an alternative term for user-centric approaches to recommender processes, a shift that reflects the user’s significant role in shaping what they see online. Customisation suggests a bespoke rather than a mass-produced effect, that is, a user taking what has been offered and bending it to reflect their personal tastes and preferences. In the context of the social feed, the benefit of using the term *customisation* is that it suggests that the user has not

simply been on the receiving end of algorithmic recommendations but that they have been able to modify these through their actions, taking a more commanding role in content discoverability on their social media feeds. This distinction also makes clearer the differentiation in paradigms and approaches when examining recommender processes, with the user positioned as the driving force for system responses.

As discussed in Chapter 5, while platforms may present a single set of surrounds and vectors through the platform interface and affordances available to all users, the users of these platforms are anything but uniform. For example, the news avoidant user of Facebook might successfully avoid all news content on this platform, whereas the news seeker may go on to this platform primarily for that purpose, suggesting that each user is able to customise the social feed to their preferences through their interactions with platform affordances. TikTok, for instance, might be experienced as an endless scroll of funny animal videos for one user yet might be the means of hearing from Indigenous voices about a political policy debate for another user. In these examples, while users may be accessing the same platform that operates with the same recommender algorithm, they nonetheless may be having very different content experiences. Moreover, while the recommender systems promoting content may operate by the same applied logic, this logic is nonetheless reliant on each user's actions to create data points to interpret and differentiate what is shown on the social feed.

The findings I have presented in this thesis support an alternative approach to studying recommender algorithms, one in which the end user is centred as an agentic force in these processes and which highlights the differing customisation experiences achieved on social media platforms through consumptive curation. My arguments for centring the user, their literacy, and their motivations and expectations (rather than the platform algorithm in recommender systems and its logics) are manifold. Firstly, centring research on the user

provides a new perspective from which to review many of the concerns raised by algorithmic-centric approaches. Acknowledging the varied experiences of end users, as well as identifying where their practices create points of differentiation in what they see or experience after recommender processes have occurred, may provide new insights into how algorithmic literacy is gained and developed. Such an acknowledgement may inform policy relating to platform and algorithmic governance and could suggest how news media organisations might best reach and connect with audiences on social media platforms. It might also surface new affordances of value to both the users and platform operators.

Secondly, users outnumber platforms by a factor of hundreds of millions to one; as social media platform stakeholders, users also outnumber advertisers. These may appear to be overly simplistic statements to make; however, as stated earlier, users are frequently grouped together as a single entity in some academic works. Picard, who also argued for reconceptualising the news audience as a myriad of individuals rather than as monolithic, articulates this position well in his critique of news media:

The idea of “the audience” was always an abstraction, of course, made up of individuals but measured and understood as a collection of people presumed to exhibit similar wants and needs and other shared characteristics. In reality, audiences have only been constantly changing groups of individuals. The audience concept was built upon the idea that they would passively receive information of someone else’s choosing and when linked with political philosophy the audiences of media became the “masses” or “public” that others sought to influence through content. (2010, p. 60)

Some scholars have positioned algorithms as the gatekeepers of news media on social media platforms, with the audience seen yet again as monolithic rather than as having curatorial

agency. Picard's words still ring true for this modern era: it is now algorithms rather than human editors that are seen to be acting as gatekeepers of news content.

By centring users and depicting them as the multitude that they are, users and their practices can be viewed as a powerful force within recommender dynamics. And they are powerful—without individual users, and their curated networks and their curated practices, social media platforms would be just like any other legacy media platform: a broadcast determined by the platform owner. Without user data, personalised feeds would not be personalised at all. Without user data, new features would not be developed to address changing user preferences. Without user data, platforms have nothing unique to sell to advertisers. By centring the user, the power dynamic is shifted to reveal inflection points in recommender processes where the user's influence is both more apparent and impactful.

Finally, it is through algorithmic literacy that the everyday user is able to understand how to capitalise on these inflection points to shape their own experiences with social media content. As argued in Chapter 5, social feeds are shaped by curation practices, both productive and consumptive. The consumptive curation practices outlined in this thesis attest to this, with each participant having different content experiences even when using the same platforms: the accounts they follow, the content they interact with, and the content they allocate attention to are all vectors in the creation of customisable social media feeds. So too are the productive curation practices that each may engage in, from initial account set up through to posting original content or re-sharing posts to their accounts (Davis, 2017). The concepts of active and passive curation highlight how everyday users engage in practices that affect the social feed. The connection between practice and outcome is either active, that is, conscious and purposeful, such as when a user decides to interact with content specifically to promote more like it in their feed—or passive, that is, when the user experiences the effect of

a previously taken action, such as when they notice an increase in specific content on their feed after previously interacting with similar content.

As noted above, algorithmic literacy refers to the ability of a user to understand the relationship between their actions and the automated decisions made by recommender algorithms (Koenig, 2020; Zarouali et al., 2021). Algorithmic literacy is evident when users consciously act to curate their feed, or when they recognise how a previous passive action has contributed to what they later see on their social feed. As such, active curation practices, and connecting passive curation to content experiences, are indicators of algorithmic literacy. The findings presented in Chapter 5 also allow us to also draw a direct line between algorithmic literacy and active curation practices: the more algorithmically literate the user, the more likely they are to engage in these practices. This relationship between practices and algorithmic literacy maps onto the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale (AMCA-scale) (Zarouali et al., 2021) and all five of the proposed dimensions: *content filtering*, *automated decision-making*, *human-algorithm interplay*, *algorithmic persuasion*, and *ethical considerations*. This suggests that curation practices could be ideal for developing interventions aimed at increasing the algorithmic literacy of everyday users of social media platforms, as well as other digital literacy practices around news, information, and mis- or dis-information.

However, algorithmic literacy does not always predict curatorial agency. While centring the user in discussions of algorithmic recommender systems presents new opportunities for research, it is important to ensure that algorithmic literacy and digital ability are not confused with individuals' motivations, preferences, and expectations relating to social media use. As discussed above, although the participants in this research project displayed mid to high levels of algorithmic literacy, they did not always choose to actively

curate their social feed. Some participants were happy with the recommended content they were seeing as they felt this was part of the social media experience. Meanwhile, others explicitly avoided some curation practices such as keyword filtering or unfollowing accounts because they wanted to have an ‘unfiltered’ experience of social media content where they could keep up with trending topics and monitor public sentiment around them. While these users nonetheless demonstrated high algorithmic literacy throughout the data collection process, they also understood that in exchange for supplying the data they generated and for being targets of advertising they would have access to the public spaces created by these platforms, where they could take in and become part of the flow of information.

Understanding the value that each user places on their experiences with social media platforms is one example of applying a user-centric approach to the study of algorithmic recommender processes. Further suggestions as to its application are discussed in Chapter 8.

In the next section, I explore the implications of my finding on the ubiquity of cultural commentary and its role in fostering public debate on social media, and how it expands on Dutton’s (2009) conceptualisation of the fifth estate.

7.4 Cultural commentary’s contribution to public sphericules and the fifth estate

Along with examining how users respond to algorithmic recommendations through their social media curation practices, in this thesis I also aimed to contextualise these curation practices by exploring their effect on personalised social feeds, specifically, information flows that relate to news and topics of social interest. This was framed in the secondary research question: “How do these curation practices affect the news and information they are exposed to on social media platforms?” As discussed in Chapter 1, I developed this question

in recognition of the many non-journalistic news sources that form part of information flows on social media and that convey public affairs related content. Through the exploration of this research question, I aimed to address the imbalance in existing scholarly works about news exposure that preference professional news content on social media platforms over other sources of topical information.

In Chapter 6, I discussed how socially significant information frequently came to participants from non-journalistic sources, which form part of the ambient news environment that users experience on social media platforms. The cultural commentary seen by participants originating from friends, family, celebrities, influencers, other public figures, and even brands and businesses, was mediated by platform algorithms, which in turn were influenced by the participants' active and passive curation practices. Yet, even news avoidant participants were exposed to cultural commentary, and this kept them up-to-date on socially significant information. By focusing on non-journalistic sources of socially relevant information, I was able to draw attention to the scale of these sources within information flows on social media platforms. It also highlighted the differing formats in which this commentary was appearing, such as memes, hot takes, and other personal critiques of trending topics—forms that reflect platform vernaculars.

It is here that two concepts relating to the contexts of news dissemination and deliberation become useful for understanding how cultural commentary has become prevalent in social media information flows, namely, Bruns & Highfield's 'public sphericules' (2016) and Hermida's 'ambient journalism' (2010). As discussed in Chapter 2, the public sphere has become a kind of shorthand to refer to public opinion expressed through public debates held in public places and has become synonymous with concepts of participatory democracy through mass media. The concept of the public sphere, as imagined by Habermas, can be seen

as a romanticisation of media's role in a functioning democracy, a space where citizens are informed by media coverage before collectively forming the 'public opinion' which guides democratic processes such as policy making and voting in elections (Habermas, 1974; Habermas, 1989). While some have argued that the Internet, and social media in particular, are creating a new virtual public sphere (Bruns, 2018; Dahlgren, 2005; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Gimmmler, 2001), I agree with Bruns and Highfield (2016) that social media platforms produce multiple sphericules or micro-publics, rather than a single shared public sphere. I take the same position as Papacharissi (2002, 2008) that online spaces such as social media platforms are more of a virtual public space for sharing ideas and opinions than a sphere of unified debate. I also concur with Hindman's (2008) assessment that public opinion is still steered by elites rather than citizens in these online spaces, and that traditional media organisations and political actors are driving much of the discussions and cultural commentary found in this study.

Nonetheless, the concept of the public sphere as shorthand for public spaces where individuals are able to access socially significant information is serviceable for the social media context as these spaces are important to the democratic process: they allow for varied voices to be heard and differing opinions to be aired even if this is still an asymmetric process dominated by already powerful voices (Benhabib, 1997; Dahlgren, 2005; Fraser, 1990; Hindman, 2008). Social media platforms are important public spaces, having attained this position through the ease with which everyday users can publish content to them, which includes contributing their own opinions and interpretations of issues of public interest. At the time of writing, Twitter proves to be a powerful example of how social media platforms can be venerated by some as important sites of public discussion, highlighted by the rapid changes and instability brought to the platform by new owner Elon Musk (Benton et al., 2022; Pariser, 2022). Cultural commentary content from non-journalistic sources thrives on

social media platforms because the virtual public spaces facilitated by these platforms have made it easy for anyone to access and contribute to public debate, at times providing counter narratives to mainstream media reporting and other powerful entities such as politicians and platform owners.

It is the cultural commentary in these public spaces that evoke Hermida's observations about the ambient journalism environment, an environment that explicitly exists on social media platforms where "the journalism itself becomes fragmented and omnipresent, constructed by both journalists and audiences" (Hermida, 2012, p. 310). Ambient journalism acknowledges the two-step flow of information (Choi, 2015; Soffer, 2021), whereby audiences become aware of topical news stories through an intermediary rather than directly from journalists or news media sources. Hermida frames the ambient journalism environment as one where news media content is augmented by contributions from non-journalistic sources responding to published content, and these act as intermediaries that also extend the reach of topical news to a broader audience through two-step flows and online discussions.

In Chapter 6, I presented evidence that these intermediaries active within ambient journalism environments on social media platforms are frequently the friends and family of users that are connected within a social network, although they can also be any other social media account holder the user is exposed to, including influencers and celebrities, businesses and brands, or other public figures such as academics, activists, or politicians. While the cultural commentaries these intermediaries share can take the form of reflective opinions, interpretations, or concise summaries of breaking news topics, but they are more commonly presented as hot takes, memes, or commentary conforming to popular platform vernaculars and other forms of vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2015). I argue that these forms of cultural commentary are increasingly common within the ambient journalism

environment and contribute to the dissemination of news as well as the construction and interpretation of it through raw opinions, humour, and satire that might otherwise be sidelined as entertaining content. I also argue that cultural commentary on social media appears to be somewhat immune to the active curation practices of news avoidant users.

This thesis contributes to our understanding of ambient journalism environments by highlighting just how ‘ambient’ this type of content has become: when newsworthy content takes the form of popular platform vernaculars, it becomes less obvious that it is informative. As I noted in Chapter 6, many of the participants in this research study commented that they had not realised how much of the content they were seeing was acting as a proxy for professional news content in their general news media diets—whether this was learning about breaking news from memes or hot takes shared on Twitter or TikTok, seeing interpretations of news events shared by fashion and lifestyle influencers on Instagram, or cultural commentary from friends and family on Facebook reflecting on a socially significant issue like racism, wealth inequality, or gendered violence.

My findings also point to cultural commentary content from non-journalistic sources as increasingly contributing to online activism, especially where the individual commenting feels that an issue is not being given the attention it deserves in the mainstream media, or where they feel that marginalised voices are not being heard. Cultural commentary content that not only disseminates information but also interprets events and reflects on injustices within them contributes to digital activism, where “social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 12). This activism may not always be in the service of social issues affecting marginalized groups or an inspiration for political engagement although it does frequently speak to a desire for accountability where power imbalances exist, both large and small. Examples of digital

activism seen by participants included a petition to include teaching consent in schools started by an acquaintance of Jessica, the many content creators Joshua saw on TikTok drawing attention to issues of racism and the cost of living, as well as the many examples of Covid-19 vaccine promotion seen by the majority of participants via various friends, family, celebrities, and public figures sharing that they had taken their first dose. In all of these examples, the cultural commentary that users shared contributed to activism, with the individual aligning themselves to an issue through the re-sharing of content they felt was important, or by creating their own cultural commentary on the issue. Customisation and production practices such as these contribute to ambient journalism because they inform about topical issues and provide a watchdog functionality; at the same time, cultural commentaries fall outside of journalistic norms as they call for not just dissemination and analysis of an issue or topic, but judgement on it as well.

Activism can take on other forms, as seen in examples of ‘call out’ posts from individual users, as well as the popular dedicated call out accounts discussed in Chapter 6, such as @dietprada, @esteelaundry, @celeb_spellcheck, and @BrandsOwned. This type of cultural commentary content speaks directly to the roles of activist and watchdog that some social media users adopt for issues that may otherwise receive little mainstream news attention, proving that they can be an effective mechanism of accountability. Its effectiveness can be seen in the ongoing defamation case taken out by Italian luxury fashion house Dolce & Gabbana against @dietprada’s account holders after the latter called out the brand with accusations of racism, which the brand claims has led to a loss of potential revenue in the hundreds of millions of Euro (O’Connor, 2021). The events that participants Samantha and Lauren reported (see Chapter 6) surrounding Australian comedian Alex Williamson is another example of call-out posts shared as cultural commentary. In this particular example, Samantha saw multiple examples of cultural commentary on the topic across various feminist

accounts she followed calling for the comedian to be held to account, while Lauren noted that much of the discussion that she had seen on social media was led by Australian media personality Abbie Chatfield rather than by the accuser or in formal media reporting²³.

Call out accounts, as well as individual account holders both large and small, that draw attention to problematic behaviours from large brands or public figures can be framed as a manifestation of Dutton's (2009) concept of the fifth estate, which proposes that the Internet has enabled individuals to hold power to account via the same mechanisms once held by publishers and broadcast media operators. Interestingly, while the call out accounts discussed here and in Chapter 6 did at times target governments and political actors, they generally focused their attention on large brands and corporate entities that in some instances have revenues that rival the GDP of small nation states. In all cases, very sizable followings were used to draw attention to issues such as intellectual property theft by established brands from smaller creators, racism within a brand or an industry, or other problematic behaviours that might otherwise not gain widespread attention.

This type of activism typically aims to protect individual people as well as minoritised groups from predatory business behaviours, as well as to hold brands and corporations responsible when they perpetuate or contribute to social issues such as racism, ableism, and sexism. The call out accounts discussed in Chapter 6 also had in common a conversational tone and humorous approach that is a hallmark of non-journalistic cultural commentary content. Memes, hot takes, and pop culture references were frequently employed by these

²³ Through the comparative analysis conducted for this thesis, I was able to confirm that the topic was eventually reported in mainstream news media. However, it was the fallout from Williamson's social media responses to the accusations that made the headlines, not the accusations themselves. It is also notable that this reporting was mostly absent from legacy news media reporting, with the majority found in born-digital youth-oriented Australian titles such as *Junkee*, *Pedestrian TV* and *The Brag*, as well as *News.com.au*. *The West Australian* was the only legacy broadsheet masthead to cover the topic in Australia. (See "Alex 'Shooter' Williamson dropped...", 2021; Fowler, 2021; Hoffmann, 2021; Lefevre, 2021; Tyeson, 2021.)

accounts to resonate with their audience and to incite action, which in turn increased the primary post's shareability through everyday users. These types of cultural commentary are increasingly being used by a wide range of social media users to draw attention to problematic behaviour, with no individual user too small to start a conversation. The fifth estate appears to have come into its own in this context, with everyday users able to directly contribute to holding power to account.

While cultural commentary content contributes to the ambient journalism environment, and call outs can be beneficial for holding those in power to account, it is important to recognise that these mechanisms are only beneficial so long as the source information is credible, reliable, and relevant to the public spaces within which it is shared. As with the media in their role as the fourth estate, the fifth estate is also at risk of succumbing to issues of misdirected anger and injustice through trial by social media, such as unwarranted vigilantism (Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020) and mob censorship (Waisbord, 2020). The previously discussed case of Alex Williamson is a good example of the latter—no formal charges had been laid against the Australian comedian or investigations opened at the time of writing. Algorithmic literacy can contribute to healthy information flows appearing within recommender processes on social media platforms; however, algorithmic literacy's impact on this flow is limited by many other factors, including those relating to the creation of mis- and disinformation (Jack, 2017), the preferencing of opinions over facts in a post-truth era (Harsin, 2018), as well as the belief structures of individuals active on social media (Douglas et al., 2019). It is not the purpose of this thesis to explore the degree of information disorder that has emerged in these spaces, but rather to emphasise that social media platforms host a plurality of information that supports news exposure that can trigger news seeking behaviour.

7.5 Conclusion

In Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis, I presented evidence from my field work that demonstrates the crucial role of individual users in shaping the information flows they are exposed to on social media platforms through their consumptive curation practices, which include their preferred formats for consuming news and socially significant information. In this chapter, I have argued for a more user-centric approach to the study of algorithmic recommender processes, one that recognises the impact users have on the social feed that they are exposed to and how they can act to customise rather than passively accept a personalised feed. As active curation practices are linked to algorithmic literacy, I suggest that these practices can be framed as inflection points in the algorithmic recommender process where individual users are able to have the greatest influence on automated decisions on social media platforms. I argue that these inflection points create avenues for further exploration that may enhance our understanding of how algorithmic literacy develops through experience technologies.

In this chapter, I have also argued that the ambient journalism environments of social media platforms are increasingly composed of cultural commentary content that fits popular platform vernaculars such as memes, hot takes, and satire from a range of everyday users, celebrities, influencers, and other non-journalistic public figures, brands, and businesses. These commentaries are a means by which everyday users are able to participate in public debates and provide an opportunity for users to learn about topical issues via this type of informal content.

Opportunities for further investigation and real-world applications based on these findings are elaborated in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the effect that everyday social media users' consumptive curation practices have on news visibility in their social feeds, with a particular focus on users' ability to influence the content of feeds that are personalised by recommender algorithms. I started with the following research questions:

- 1) How and why do users curate access to news on social media platforms through their consumption practices?
- 2) How do these curation practices affect the news and information they are exposed to on social media platforms?

In Chapter 2, I framed these questions within the existing literature in the fields of critical algorithm studies, digital cultures, media and communications, journalism studies, platform and technology studies, and sociology. In doing so, I demonstrated that there were gaps in the literature regarding how everyday users develop curation practices in response to algorithmic processing, and provided a definition of what news is within the context of social media use.

I then presented two methodological chapters (Chapters 3 and 4). The first provided a theoretical framework for approaching the research questions, which draw on practice theory (Couldry, 2004; Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki et al., 2001), theoretical treatments of curation practices (Davis, 2017; Thorson & Wells, 2016), platform affordances (Davis, 2020; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019; Norman, 2013), and algorithmic literacy (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Zarouali et al., 2021) to develop the plan of inquiry and analysis. Next, I introduced my research design, which incorporated digital ethnographic approaches (Hjorth et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2016), and comparative content analysis (McMillan, 2000) into a grounded theory approach to analysing curatorial practices and news visibility (Charmaz, 2015; Strauss &

Corbin, 1994). This plan of inquiry and analysis was formulated to address the unique ethical considerations for undertaking direct observation of social media practices within the contexts in which they appear (Bhatia-Lin et al., 2019; franzke et al., 2020; Gerrard, 2021; Moreno et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2023; Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

In Chapter 5, I presented a comprehensive taxonomy of curation practices in order to unpack the depth and breadth of human agency over news and information in recommender systems. This taxonomy highlights practices that are actively and purposefully engaged to curate the social media feed, as well as the more passive practices that impact what users see. Each practice has been further categorised as either inviting or dissuading content from appearing in the feed. I suggested that it was most likely that participants engaged in active dissuading practices more frequently than active inviting practices because the affordances for dissuading content tend not to be visible from the main app interface and require users to take action to seek them out. As discussed in Chapter 5, my conceptualisation of active curation practices draws on the work of Davis (2017), building on her theoretical treatment of consumptive and productive curation practices to map which consumptive practices were in use and why users engaged in them. In addition, I connected social media users' active curation practices to their algorithmic literacy (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020; Swart, 2021; Zarouali et al., 2021) and their desire to curate their social media feed to meet their personal motivations and expectations, which represents an original contribution to knowledge within the fields of media studies and critical algorithm studies.

The second results chapter (Chapter 6) drew attention to the ubiquity of cultural commentary content as a news source within the ambient journalism environment (Hermida, 2010) of social media platforms, as well as how this type of informal content frequently

appeared on participants' social feeds even after they had engaged in active curation practices to avoid traditional news.

In the discussion chapter (Chapter 7), I considered the significance of these findings, arguing that the link between algorithmic literacy and active curation practices warrants a re-centring of the user in future studies of algorithmic recommender processes. I also highlighted how agency can be enacted through active curation practices, whereby a user may choose to engage in these practices to train the algorithm in their personal preferences, or they may choose to defer curation of their feed to the platform algorithm even though they have the knowledge and capacity to do so themselves. I built on the concept of ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010) and extended existing understandings of news exposure on social media to argue that informal cultural commentary content, in the form of memes, hot takes, satire, and other popular genres of social media content, can act as a proxy for news media content on social media platforms, contributing to public debate and the mechanisms of the fifth estate (Dutton, 2009).

To conclude this thesis, these original contributions to knowledge will be discussed in relation to the constraints of the research project, as well as to future opportunities for building further on this research.

8.1 Limitations

This thesis set out to contribute to our understanding of everyday user curation practices on social media platforms, and how these practices affect the social feed experienced. While the findings discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 suggest that users can take a more active role in shaping the social feed through their consumptive curation practices, these findings need to be viewed in the light of the limitations to this study. These limitations relate to the small

sample size, the demographic homogeneity, the Western-centric platform focus, and the atypical context of social media use during the pandemic lockdowns, as discussed in Chapter 4—all of these constrain how the findings presented in this thesis might be generalised to other contexts.

The primary limitation relates to the location of the study. Australia is an affluent country, with a very high penetration rate of home Internet connection and smart device technologies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016–17; We Are Social, 2023), where around 81% of the population has a social media account. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, the social media platforms that are popular in Australia and which were observed during data collection for this thesis are not universally popular around the world. Therefore, we may ask: How might algorithmic awareness and curation practices differ in other regions, especially where surveillance and privacy concerns are heightened? How effective are consumptive curation practices on non-English dominating platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, and Red in China? Or VK in Russia? Or Taringa in Latin America? Replicating the study with non-English dominant social media platforms would provide further evidence as to the universality (or not) of the curation practices discussed in Chapter 5, as well as the link between algorithmic literacy levels and active curation practices.

This thesis also focused on emerging news consumers aged between 18 and 30 years of age, with the aim of examining practices that may become dominant in the future as this demographic matures. For many users in this age group, social media platforms have been popular throughout their childhood, alongside other algorithmically mediated platforms such as search engines and streaming content services. However, for many older social media users, exposure to algorithmically mediated platforms can begin much later in life, which may impact how algorithmic literacy develops from a more limited experience with these

technologies. This thesis is unable to comment on the curation practices enacted by older generations of users where algorithmic literacy may vary significantly within the same age groups based on experience with them.

The final limitation I would like to discuss relates to the data collection approach taken in this thesis. The plan of inquiry was designed to explicitly address the ethical concerns raised by observing the social media activity of 3rd party users connected to the research participant, including activity that 3rd parties have restricted to their network connections, as well as activity that is otherwise publicly available on these platforms. As discussed in Chapter 4, as it was unfeasible to collect informed consent from these 3rd party users, interviews and media go-alongs were restricted to audio recording only. In addition, as just one investigator was conducting the interviews, some details were missed due to the challenges around conducting and managing an interview while at the same time taking field notes. For future research projects that wish to adopt a similar methodology, I would recommend audio recording to maintain the contextual integrity of all the data observed. However, I would also strongly recommend a second or even third investigator to take part in the interviews and media go-alongs to ensure that focus can be maintained during the interviewing process while at the same time allowing for more detailed field notes to be taken so as to yield richer data. Data donation, also called data download packages (Boeschoten et al., 2020), might present itself as a means of circumventing this issue; however, currently these packages do not include a complete record of what is seen on the social feed but instead present only a record of the content that the user has interacted with in some way, such as ‘liking’ or commenting on the post.

8.2 Future directions

Taking the findings of this thesis as a stepping off point, there are a number of promising avenues for further research into curation practices, algorithmic literacy, and cultural commentary content on social media platforms that would benefit critical algorithm studies, digital cultures studies, as well as social media end users and other stakeholders.

Firstly, the findings of this thesis suggest that building algorithmic awareness and algorithmic literacy in everyday users of social media is achievable through interventions that encourage these users to link their practices to their social feed experiences, rather than relying on exposure and engagement with algorithms as an experience technology alone. Further empirical studies that identify effective interventions at the intersection between curation action and social feed outcome—that is, interventions that empower end users to become more engaged with recommender processes on a range of platforms where they are prevalent—would be of potential value to educators, policy makers, and parents addressing the ‘digital literacy’ general capability in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022).

Secondly, data collected for this study stemmed from the participants’ authentic social media accounts, many of which had been active for over a decade. This was of benefit to the study as it allowed for very different contexts of use to be observed. However, in terms of understanding how recommender algorithms respond to individual user choices and practices, replication of this methodology using virgin accounts would provide new insights into mutual structuring action of the consumptive curation practices that users enact to establish their accounts, while responding to platform recommender algorithms that are simultaneously creating a profile of them. Such a study could provide insight into how platform algorithms respond to initial settings and consumptive curation choices, and how quickly the feed starts

to respond to this customisation. Additionally, this data could be compared to the users' existing authentic accounts on the same platform to determine the degree of differentiation seen. I hypothesise that where users have held the same account for many years and tend not to unfollow accounts, the differences in the social feed may be more apparent. If the results of such a study proved otherwise, it could present evidence that platform algorithms are more aggressive at prioritising content over user preferences, that is, what users are able to influence through curation.

Thirdly, in this study I have focused on the everyday user of social media. However, given the prevalence of social media in our daily lives and the age at which new users first create social media accounts, it is fair to assume that tomorrow's content creators would have first experienced recommender algorithms on social media in their capacity as everyday users. A study of the curation practices of everyday users as they transition into content creator roles would be a fertile field of study that would contribute to our understanding of how algorithmic literacy develops for different types of social media users. Such studies could examine: how curation practices differ during the transition from everyday users to content creator; how these users develop and learn about different curation practices needed in this new context; how these curation practices are shaped by accumulated experiences with platform algorithms as both everyday users and content creators; what their motivations for transitioning to content creator might be, and what do these users perceive to be successful outcomes for these content creator accounts. Such studies would provide valuable insight into the literacy and entrepreneurial skills needed to succeed economically on social media platforms, and how curation practice might contribute to their success. While it may be challenging to source appropriate participants who are considering transitioning from everyday user to content creator for such a study, approaching individuals involved in

crafting workshops, or students undertaking learning for new business planning may prove fruitful.

Finally, the findings from this thesis may inspire new approaches to news production to appeal to emerging news consumers. Since the start of the data collection, Australian news brands such as the ABC, The Guardian, and 7 News have increased their presence on a range of platforms including TikTok and Instagram and have been experimenting with content formats that more closely resemble platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015). However, these nonetheless tend to lean quite heavily into traditional news reporting formats and language, making them visually (but not textually) match platform vernaculars. The effects of adopting a stronger cultural commentary approach to textual as well as visual elements—including more overt expressions of opinion and the use of humour while maintaining journalistic integrity—may be a line of inquiry worth pursuing²⁴.

8.3 Concluding summary

As technologies change, so do the practices around their use. While this thesis has contributed to our understanding of how everyday users understand and respond to recommender algorithms on social media platforms, and how their practices impact news visibility in this context, each element of this context is liable to change over time.

Algorithms are constantly updated to prioritise different types of content, and platforms often update the user interface to introduce or remove affordances. Users respond to these changes by adjusting their curation practices based on what they perceive to be effective. While news

²⁴ The US National Park Service social media accounts (Twitter and Instagram in particular) are a good example of how platform vernacular can be incorporated into the responsible dissemination of informative public service content. As their Social Media Specialist Matthew Turner has said, “it’s about holding that fine line of government agency pushing out important messages and educating people as we welcome them. The humor is often used to draw people in. But beyond the funny, there is usually a safety message, a deeper dive into park resources or policy, or a fun fact.” (Jones, 2020)

media producers also respond to changes in algorithms, they also seek to shift their audiences' preferences by adopting new approaches to their social media presence. And of course, a user's interest (and trust) in the news is liable to change over time. What is unlikely to change for some time is the presence of recommender algorithms on these platforms as well as users' desires to shape the social feed to meet their wants and needs. This thesis therefore provides not only a moment-in-time study of practices around news consumption on social media platforms and algorithmic awareness through experience, but it also offers a baseline against which future comparisons can be made.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-structured interview questions and prompts

Initial interview

Audit

- Which social media sites do you use?
- (For each platform they use)
 - What device do you normally use to access it?
 - How many people do you follow/are in this social network?
 - Roughly how many of these are people you know in real life, like friends and family?
 - Who are the main people you follow that you *don't* know in real life?
 - Prompt with celebrities, musicians, influencers, streamers. They media personalities or journalists, then businesses or organisations
 - When/how long do you spend on this site each day?
- Do you have any thoughts or feelings about your social media usage at the moment?

Usage

- Which of these do you spend the most time on? Why?
- What do you normally do when you're on the site? Can you show me by sharing your screen please? (start go-along)
 - Prompt if needed: part of any groups; commenting on public posts; sharing info/memes, etc; creating video content like stories, Tiktoks; blocking or filtering; adjusting site settings;

Joining Networks

- Mutually join each social network.

- Demonstrate changing audience settings for private posts
- Get participant to create a post on each platform announcing that they are part of the research (if they haven't already).

Follow Up interviews

- Ask if anyone in their social networks commented on their announcement post about being part of research (2nd follow up interview only).

Usage

- What's the most memorable thing that happened on socials since we last talked?
- Anything else that sticks out? What else was being talked about?
- Start go-along – open each Social platform and ask participant to narrate their usage. Prompts might include:
 - o Why did you like/react to that post?
 - o Do you normally read or skip over posts from that person?
 - o Do you ever block or hide content from specific people?
 - o etc.
- Did you add/remove anyone from any of your socials since we last talked? Or change any other setting? (If yes, what and why)

Final interview

Usage

- What's the most memorable thing that happened on socials since we last talked?
- Anything else that sticks out? What else was being talked about?
- Start go-along – open each Social platform and ask participant to narrate their usage. Prompts might include:
 - o Why did you like/react to that post?
 - o Do you normally read or skip over posts from that person?
 - o Do you ever block or hide content from specific people?

- etc.
- Did you add/remove anyone from any of your socials since we last talked? Or change any other setting? (If yes, what and why)

Reflection

- Do you have any thoughts or feelings about your social media usage now?
- What stood out for you about participating in this project?
- Have you noticed anything change in how you use social media?
- Are you more aware/have you learnt anything new about the platforms you use?

Leave Networks

- Get participant to make an announcement that the project is now over and they are no longer being observed.
- Mutually leave each social network, sharing screens to confirm I am no longer in their contacts/networks.
- Thank participant.