

John M. Jordan, **The Rise of the Algorithms: How YouTube and TikTok Conquered the World**, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024, 232 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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The Rise of the Algorithms: How YouTube and TikTok Conquered the World by John M. Jordan is a rigorous and lucid account of how online video platforms have transformed from niche repositories into the most powerful cultural infrastructures of the 21st century. Through eight chapters, Jordan exposes the social, political, and economic logics that underpin big media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. The result is a book that is a normative reflection on the governance of attention.

From the outset, Jordan frames the central paradox of the algorithmic age: The same systems that democratize participation also amplify toxicity and misinformation. His framing of online video as a “new kind of cultural resource” (p. 8) captures the tension between openness and control that defines digital culture. By combining technical literacy with cultural critique, Jordan positions himself in the lineage of scholars including Tarleton Gillespie (2018) and José van Dijck (2013), who have theorized platforms as hybrid infrastructures.

Jordan’s introduction sets a strikingly empirical tone. He identifies 2020 as an inflection point when the convergence of pandemic media use, regulatory scrutiny, and geopolitical tension (e.g., TikTok’s ownership) forced platforms into a new era of accountability. His attention to the global and political dimensions distinguishes this work from prior studies that treated platforms primarily as cultural phenomena.

In chapter 1, Jordan reconstructs the technical and cultural genealogy of online video. He argues that YouTube’s early “repository model”—based on user uploads and long-tail discovery—contrasts with TikTok’s mobile-first, feed-driven “attention factory” design (p. 12). This comparison illustrates how architecture encodes ideology: YouTube emphasizes the logic of search and archiving, while TikTok’s design prioritizes flow, immersion, and behavioral capture. The narrative situates technological affordances within broader cultural consequences such as remix cultures. This interplay of infrastructure and culture is where the book excels.

Chapter 2 historicizes the emergence of online video within the broader Web 2.0 paradigm, invoking Tim O’Reilly’s (2005) principles of collective intelligence and perpetual beta (software and services that are continuously updated and improved in real time). Yet he argues that those ideals have



given way to a regime of behavioral engineering, where “good enough” content, optimized interfaces, and continuous data collection transform platforms into laboratories of human attention. The transition from user empowerment to user conditioning is the through line connecting his empirical cases to his normative concerns.

Jordan’s third chapter deepens this argument by unpacking the infrastructural and ethical dilemmas of platform governance. He provides a technical yet accessible explanation of storage, streaming, and recommendation systems, suggesting that curation and moderation are not neutral functions but political acts. Algorithms decide what surfaces; moderators decide what disappears. Jordan’s account of the psychological toll on human moderators recalls Sarah Roberts’s (2019) ethnography of commercial content moderation, while his critique of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act highlights how platforms externalize responsibility while internalizing profit. Jordan also provides granular insight into the recommendation logic. Rather than classifying content semantically, algorithms use behavioral feedback as proxies for quality and relevance.

Chapter 4 pivots to pedagogy, positioning online video as a “learning by seeing” medium. Jordan catalogues the explosion of instructional and how-to content across domains, emphasizing the medium’s capacity to democratize expertise. Yet he warns of an epistemic crisis: When anyone can teach, authority becomes performative rather than credentialed. “We are in the peculiar situation of being able to learn surgery in the same venue where people insist the moon landing was faked” (p. 91). This observation crystallizes the dual promise and peril of participatory knowledge production.

The fifth chapter explores the entertainment economy of online video, where influencers, vloggers, and live streamers have become both cultural icons and economic actors. Jordan traces how parasocial intimacy has been industrialized through algorithmic amplification. Viewers now form emotional attachments to creators who appear “genuine, unscripted, and authentic” (p. 112), sustaining a system of affective labor that monetizes connection itself. Jordan’s case studies of YouTubers PewDiePie and Logan Paul show how the logic of virality often incentivizes moral transgression and spectacle.

In chapters 6 and 7, Jordan shifts from micro- to macro-scale analysis. Chapter 6 examines how technology shapes genre: TikTok’s duet feature, editing tools, and time constraints actively produce certain aesthetic forms—short, repetitive, and memetic. He argues that tool-enabled imitation and the rapid tempo of platform-driven virality can privilege stunts and memetic replication over deliberate artistic development. Here Jordan extends the “black-box society” critique (Pasquale, 2015) to culture, showing how invisible affordances discipline artistic expression.

Chapter 7 is perhaps the most original. Jordan conceptualizes a “cross-platform ecosystem” where users and content migrate fluidly among TikTok, YouTube, X, and Reddit. The viral success of Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” becomes a paradigmatic case of distributed virality, in which attention is coproduced across services. This argument reminds Nieborg and Poell’s (2018) notion of “platformization” and van Dijck’s (2013) concept of “platformed sociality.” Jordan’s methodological reflection that researchers must move beyond single-platform studies to understand networked behaviors marks a major contribution to digital media research.

Chapter 8 synthesizes the aforementioned threads into a policy argument. Jordan insists that online video is not merely a medium but a global infrastructure—private in ownership yet public in consequence. Because recommendation engines personalize experience at scale, traditional broadcast regulations are inadequate. He calls for interdisciplinary policymaking that integrates technical literacy with normative deliberation about what values society wishes to encode into algorithms. Rather than offering a concrete road map, Jordan provides a principled framework for reform, emphasizing transparency, interdisciplinary research, and civic engagement.

The book's conclusion reiterates the thesis that algorithmic curation has outpaced human oversight. Jordan explicitly rejects technological determinism, emphasizing that algorithms are not autonomous agents but designed systems whose consequences stem from human choices, incentive structures, and governance failures. He advocates transparency, large-scale empirical research, and civic engagement as the only viable routes to restore accountability in digital ecosystems. His closing metaphor—algorithms as a mirror of human behavior—encapsulates his cautious optimism.

Beyond analyzing Jordan's arguments, it is crucial to assess his theoretical integration. By weaving together media systems theory, behavioral economics, and platform studies, he advances a multidimensional model of algorithmic power. His synthesis of Gillespie (2018), van Dijck (2013), and Zuboff (2019) situates platforms as socio-technical systems where infrastructure, ideology, and psychology converge. Few works have so effectively bridged the divide between technical specificity and cultural interpretation. In other words, what distinguishes the book from adjacent works is its capacity to operate simultaneously at the levels of infrastructure, economy, and culture. Jordan neither fetishizes technology nor moralizes certain users. Instead, he presents algorithmic systems as the new industrial logic of mediation, which organizes culture through metrics of engagement, often at odds with democratic values. In this sense, the book contributes not just to media studies but also to political theory and sociology of technology.

For scholars, the book offers a conceptual vocabulary for studying algorithmic culture; for policymakers, it provides an evidence-based critique of unaccountable infrastructures. For educators, it models how to teach digital literacy in an age of machine-mediated attention. Its interdisciplinary reach makes it a likely touchstone for future research on media governance and technological power.

Nonetheless, the book is not without blind spots. While Jordan gestures toward global and geopolitical dimensions, his analysis remains largely centered on U.S. and Western contexts. TikTok's operations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are treated briefly but merit deeper comparative analysis. Intersectional perspectives—race, gender, disability—are underdeveloped. These omissions matter because algorithmic discrimination is embodied in whose content is suppressed, amplified, or monetized. Although Jordan critiques engagement optimization, his prescriptions for reform remain general: transparency, interdisciplinary research, and civic dialogue. Readers may wish for a more concrete regulatory road map, especially given the debates over the EU Digital Services Act and U.S. Section 230.

In sum, *The Rise of the Algorithms* is both diagnosis and provocation: a lucid map of how we arrived at the algorithmic present and a challenge to imagine a more accountable digital future. Alongside

Zuboff's (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* and Gillespie's (2018) *Custodians of the Internet*, Jordan's book is foundational texts in understanding how computation has redefined communication. For those studying the digital public sphere, it is an indispensable reading.

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