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Article – Theme section

The Absent Algorithm

Communicating around artificial intelligence in enterprise social media

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Abstract

If your medium is shaped by an algorithm, then what reason would you have to hide this? This article explores the topic of how the algorithmic shaping of communication on enterprise social media (ESM) is, in turn, communicated by platform developers to potential customer organizations. Specifically, the article analyzes how this topic is usually not discussed and why. As a case study, the author performs a qualitative analysis of the corporate communication surrounding the ESM Workplace from Meta, analyzing the 23 podcast episodes and 123 online videos produced by Meta on this topic. This case was selected due to the prolific discussion of algorithmic curation in other Meta products, and the presence of such algorithmic underpinnings on Workplace itself. Despite this, Meta's emphasis is usually on more explicit examples of artificial intelligence in the form of communicative bots, and especially on how these may circumvent algorithmically curated or individualized communication patterns of employees. Drawing on critical management and organizational studies, the author discusses possible explanations relating to the distribution of power between organizations and platforms.

Keywords

Enterprise social media, algorithms, artificial intelligence, human-machine communication, organizational studies, Meta

Introduction

In all the recent excitement about "artificial intelligence" (AI) across many disciplines and institutions, the comparatively humble "algorithm" risks being overlooked. "Algorithms" as such are not to be confused with "artificial intelligence" but are usually merely understood as a general term for a guidance-providing process (Dourish, 2016). However, the algorithms that shape the content and feeds of social media are often understood to be a form of artificial intelligence (Grandinetti, 2023; Pérez–Acuña & Fernández-Aller, 2022). These mechanisms are colloquially referred to as "the algorithm" or variations thereupon by both scholars (Bucher, 2012), journalists (Horowitz, 2023) and even spokespeople for companies like Meta, the company behind such algorithmically driven social media as Facebook (Clegg, 2021). Such algorithmic systems are an example of what might be termed a "mundane" artificial intelligence (Lomborg, 2023), a type of system that has long interested media scholars alongside more flashy exemplars of so-called "artificial intelligence" (Bucher, 2012; Crawford, 2021; Natale, 2021a, 2021b)

However, while representatives of a company like Meta, in particular, have been keen to emphasize "AI" as a coming upheaval that will solve many of the perceived problems with communication on their platforms (see e.g. Katzenbach, 2021), they are far more hesitant to describe their existing content curation algorithm as such an AI. This presents a contrast between the alleged future transformations enabled by AI (Crawford, 2021; Lagerkvist, 2020; Lindgren, 2023) and the ways in which the algorithm, as an example of such AI, is "*already* transforming how we understand and carry out social interactions" (Natale, 2021b, p. 3, emphasis added). There appears to be a chasm between how AI is portrayed by Meta (and a great number of other actors) as the solution to communicative problems (Katzenbach, 2021) while "the algorithm" is often associated with facilitating such problems (Horwitz, 2023). This article is about how this gap presents a problem when Meta introduces algorithmic media into working life. This is a context in which algorithms are becoming increasingly widespread and are often understood to necessarily facilitate managerial control (Kellog, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Nyman et al., 2024; Mettler, 2023; Woodcock, 2021), as opposed to the potential unruliness often associated with algorithmic media.

The central research problem of this article is the role artificial intelligence is portrayed as playing in enterprise social media and what this presentation suggests about organizational power dynamics. The particular research question is: *how is artificial intelligence (e.g. bots and algorithmic communication systems) portrayed as playing a role in enterprise social media, and how is this role explicable with reference to the workplace as a particular context?* The investigation focuses on a critical and significant example, Workplace by Meta (Leonardi et al., 2013). Developed and owned by Zuckerberg's Meta Corporation, Workplace mirrors several key features of the more widely known Facebook platform, even though it is far less widespread (Schaeffer, 2023; Zaveri, 2021). What characterizes Workplace as an enterprise social medium is that any given instance of the medium is

limited to members of a specific organization, usually a company. As a medium, Workplace affords the opportunity for users to create profiles and groups, and interact with each other through public posts, comments, emoji reactions, live streams, and media publications such as images, documents, and videos. Just as with the regular Facebook platform, most of this material is collated through a so-called newsfeed (Schwartz & Mahnke, 2021), which is curated by an algorithm (Lunden & Constine, 2018), a mundane example of an artificial intelligence (Lomborg, 2023). As will become apparent during this paper, this includes the algorithmic curation of user-generated content and the presence of digital bots although, crucially, these are framed as playing a very different role than in Meta's other ventures.

The empirical materials for this study include corporate communications about Workplace, specifically a selection of podcast episodes and YouTube videos from Meta's official channels. Through this analysis, I elucidate how AI is communicatively constructed within these media and assess the perceived role it plays in shaping organizational dynamics. To address the research question, I engage with a diverse array of scholarly literature from the fields of media studies as well as critical organizational and labor studies. From media studies, I incorporate insights from classical texts on the ideal purposes of (unmediated) communication (e.g. Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Peters, 1989) and more contemporary foundational works on the nature of platformized digital media (e.g., Gillespie, 2010; Caplan & boyd, 2018; Napoli & Caplan, 2018). I also consider previous research on how Meta strategically communicates (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2018), along with recent discussions on the role of so-called artificial intelligence in communicative practices (Lindgren, 2023; Natale, 2021a, 2021b). From the realm of critical organizational and management studies, I draw upon recent works that highlight the persistent unequal power dynamics within workplaces (Anderson, 2017) and question the potential of artificial intelligence to significantly alter these dynamics (Fleming, 2019; Munn, 2022; Woodcock, 2021). Aligning with critical scholarship on management and organization, and nuancing existing discussions (e.g. Fleming, 2019), I argue that overlooking the algorithmic nature of communication through Workplace and other enterprise social media serves as a reminder of the possible perceived erosion of power for managers. The central contribution of this article is thus in proposing at least one answer to why the presence of an admittedly mundane artificial intelligence may be downplayed or obscured, rather than highlighted.

Theory and background

Media, Organization, and Algorithms

In this article, I build upon several foundational assumptions about artificial intelligence. Firstly, I view the algorithmic systems that form part of many social media such as Facebook and Workplace as examples of what Lomborg (2022) describes as "mundane artificial intelligence". Such a mundane artificial intelligence make take many forms on these

platforms (Grandinetti, 2023; Pérez-Acuña & Fernández-Aller, 2022). However, one of the most controversial and visible forms in which the artificial intelligence usually referred to as "the algorithm" is visible is through the curation of news and information feeds (Schwartz & Mahnke, 2021).

I adopt an ontological perspective whereby such mundane artificial intelligences are to be viewed as media, or constituent elements of certain media (Natale, 2021a, 2021b). In turn, by being media they can be considered on a par with agents and structures, serving as a mediator among these (Jensen, 2021, p. 17). Importantly, media are analytically distinct from both humans and social or organizational structures, although they interact closely with both (Peters, 2022). This approach differs from other perspectives on the role of media, especially algorithmic media, which often highlight the challenges in separating media from other entities (e.g., Bucher, 2020, 2021). According to this view, media may not only be "extensions of man [sic]", increasing human capacities (McLuhan, 2010), but also act as "agencies of order" (Peters, 2015, p. 1) that shape human communication.

However, while individuals can exercise agency through various media, they often do not have the freedom to choose which media are available to them, or which they are required to use. This is an observation with a long history (e.g. Mueller, 2022) but which has gained prominence in discussions of algorithmic media, which are often singled out for their opacity (Pasquale, 2015). One place where the emergence of algorithmic media, and artificial intelligence in general, has been heavily discussed is in the domain of working life (Fleming, 2019; Woodcock, 2021).

Insights from organizational studies often highlight the unequal distribution of power, particularly within workplaces (Anderson, 2017). This dynamic is frequently observed in how managers exercise control over permissible media within the workplace, determining which platforms are essential to the organization's everyday functioning. Consequently, while specific personal social media platforms may be banned or discouraged in the workplace, enterprise social media usage is generally encouraged (Bagger, 2021; Leonardi et al., 2013). We can see this as a general invocation of the wish that the media of working life are often chosen at the behest of the organization's management, whose power they are meant to entrench (Kellog, Valentine & Christin, 2020).

In the following section, I will review three relevant approaches in the existing scholarship on artificial intelligence. First and foremost, I understand artificial intelligence as something to be communicated *about*, a category of communication that covers the contested *imaginaries* of artificial intelligence (Hansen, 2022; Maas, 2023). Proceeding to the *material* aspects of artificial intelligence, I follow numerous media scholars in understanding so-called artificial intelligence as being analytically approachable as a medium (Lagerkvist, 2020; Natale, 2021b). Here, in particular, the subfields of human-machine communication (HMC) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have emerged as of high interest in the topic of artificial intelligence as something to either be communicated *with* or *through*, respectively (Natale, 2021a). I do not pose these as clashing alternatives

but rather as illustrative prisms through which to view both the existing research and my data materials.

Research Review: Communicating artificial intelligence – about, with and through

Communicating about artificial intelligence

The term artificial intelligence itself has thus "moved in and out of fashion over the decades and is [currently] used more in marketing than by researchers" (Crawford, 2021, p. 9). Within industrial contexts, artificial intelligence is usually posed as a "techno-fix" to whatever organizational or societal problems we are faced with (Katzenbach, 2021). In the extreme, artificial intelligence thus "emerges as both a medium to and message about (or even from) the future, eclipsing all other possible prospects" (Lagerkvist, 2020, p. 16). This speaks to how new media are often fueled by (corporate) imaginaries of what they are supposed to achieve, which may be just as interesting as their actual features or even overshadow these (Egliston & Carter, 2022; Fast, 2018). This, in turn, underlines how discussions of artificial intelligence have often taken something of a linguistic or constructivist turn. Here, there is not only disagreement about exactly what counts as an artificial intelligence but also about whether artificial intelligences as such are "talk[ed] into being" (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2021). It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that some scholars are accordingly tempted to write AI off as an "empty signifier" (e.g. Lindgren, 2023).

In contrast to this, I proceed from a position inspired partially by critical realism. I take as a starting point the fact that any given instance of "artificial intelligences" has a material existence, not merely a discursive one. This means that they exist independent of any discussions about the applicability of "artificial intelligence" as a moniker, or about the implications (ethical, social, political, and so forth) of any given software or tool. However, this does not mean that any analysis of how artificial intelligence is (or is not) talked about is merely "talking about talking" (cf. Collier, 1994, p. 4). Instead, I argue that they may provide valuable insights into real world power relations. One place where this is highly applicable is in the discussion of the dynamics of organizational or industrial power surrounding cases such as algorithmic media.

For the purposes of this article, what is colloquially referred to as "algorithms", "the algorithm", or "algorithmic systems", for instance, in the context of digital communication and organizational management, can be understood as a subset of the general discussions of "artificial intelligence". As mentioned in the introduction, this usage of variations upon the term "algorithm" for this purpose has become quite widespread (Bucher, 2012; Clegg, 2021; Horwitz, 2023). What exact power such algorithms might help exert is a contested topic, as is who exactly is exerting this power. Within media and communications scholarship, some authors have argued for locating the power with the algorithms themselves

(e.g. Bucher, 2018), while others seem more convinced that we should primarily locate this power within the technology companies producing these algorithms (Zuboff, 2019).

Notably, neither of these visions of who holds power (the algorithm itself or the technology companies) align neatly with the preferred vision of the recent trend of algorithmic management of organizations: That such algorithms should confer power on managers and leaders (Kellog, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Nyman et al., 2023). Within this body of literature, the emphasis has usually been on how "*employers* can use algorithms to facilitate improved decision-making, coordination, and organizational learning" (Kellog, Valentine & Christin, 2020, p. 368, emphasis added). This is in noted contrast to the general body of literature that emphasizes the opacity of algorithms to workers (Walker, Fleming & Berti, 2021; Woodcock, 2021), or how these algorithms are often experienced antagonistically (Bonini & Treré, 2024; Wiehn, 2022).

Communicating with artificial intelligence

Interactions with social media can be characterized as *speaking into* a digital system (Jensen & Helles, 2017). What characterizes the usual understandings of artificial intelligences as embodied or digital others is that they seemingly "speak back" in a way that might at least let us believe we are communicating with other minds (Natale, 2021b). Zooming in on algorithmic media in working life, a prominent recurring trend in the existing scholarship is the frustration that people feel that they *cannot* communicate with these algorithms. This is perhaps most broadly captured by the recurring use of the phrase "black box" when discussing the functioning of algorithms (Pasquale, 2015). For the people trying to make a living on social media platforms, this can result in circulating rumors about what the algorithm does or does not "want" (Bishop, 2023; Glatt, 2023). Likewise, it can result in the frustrations of workers, in particular, feeling robbed of their communicative autonomy at work since they "can't pick up the phone and talk to someone" about management decisions, and managers are, in turn, exempt from being held responsible for their (lack of) decisions (Walker, Fleming & Berti, 2021, p. 34). How managers may feel their communicative power curtailed by algorithms seems to be a less scrutinized topic in the existing research. In part, it is this research gap that I seek to contribute to with this article.

Perhaps the most visible example of what communicating "with" an artificial intelligence might look like is in the form of so-called "communicative bots", systems that "serve the needs of human communication" (Hepp, 2020, p. 1411). What these needs might be seems to be a relatively broad category. Within social media platforms in general, the idea of "bots" seems to carry an overwhelmingly negative valence when referring to artificial users (Assenmacher et al., 2020). Within working life, artificial workers (embodied or digital) are often framed as an inevitable step towards the displacement of human labor (Fleming, 2019; Munn, 2022), which may have some appeal to managers and executives.

However, some scholars have tacitly highlighted how communication skills seem to be at least partially exempt from this threat for several reasons. For one, a few scholars highlight the seemingly genuine desire for human-to-human communication in at least some organizational settings (Fleming, 2019, p. 29). Furthermore, some voices highlight how human-to-human communication is a necessary precondition for the desirability of using digital platforms such as social media at all, and acts as the raw materials for the business models that are fundamental to these platforms (Zuboff, 2019). Additionally, as pointed out by media scholar Jack Qiu (2018), technology firms such as Meta may tout a discourse of automation, yet none of them "has succeeded in getting rid of its employees entirely [and] none has really attempted" (p. 301). The fully automated worker has not appeared at the heart of Silicon Valley, and Meta's product depends on humans not being completely automated out of existence everywhere else in the world.

In summary, scholars have presented numerous examples of how, in addition to being potentially replaced by artificial laborers, workers must also contend with working under algorithmic systems they have trouble understanding and communicating with. As will become apparent during the case study, this may also be a problem faced by the managers implementing or controlling the algorithmic media in question.

Communicating through artificial intelligence

Finally, a long trend of scholarship has highlighted how humans may need to communicate *through* artificial intelligence, with the communication being shaped accordingly along the way. This has perhaps been most saliently discussed by authors describing how communicative patterns are adjusted to attune to the perceived wishes of an algorithm, as discussed above. However, some scholars go even further, and argue that a significant feature of algorithmic and AI-driven media is that they are "not only the channel, but also the *producer* of communication" (Natale, 2021a, p. 907, emphasis added). By this, Natale underlines that media as such, and especially media characterized by artificial intelligence, are by no means mere conduits of information, in line with a great deal of other media scholarship.

Here, scholars of algorithms and platforms offer a very salient reminder: Namely that the study of social media and platforms is ultimately dependent upon a tacit promise of moderation and curation, algorithmic or otherwise (Napoli & Caplan, 2018; Gillespie, 2010). Enterprise social media are not fundamentally different from personal social media in this regard. When discussing limitations to expression on ESMs, the scholarly emphasis has generally been on self-censorship out of a consideration for co-workers and managers (Bagger, 2021; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016), as opposed to algorithmic content curation (cf. Lunze, 2014).

This is an insight which "challenge[s] the ideological vision of emancipation" often associated with digital means of communication and with social media in particular (Lomborg, 2017, p. 10). This "vision of emancipation" has deep precedents in the so-

called Californian Ideology of the Silicon Valley tech sector, outlined in a seminal text by Barbrook and Cameron (1996). The visions of the future outlined in this ideology might include "where "[e]xisting social, political and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by *unfettered interactions* between *autonomous individuals* and *their software*" (1996, p. 7, emphasis added). Arguably, this is a dream that is alive and well in Meta's corporate communication around their other products, as evidenced by several studies of their discourse (Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2018), and even some scattered remarks by their CEO (Andrejevic, 2019, p. 134).

To summarize the role of algorithms in shaping communication, there seems to be an interesting split in how they are viewed as benefiting actors in the context of workplaces and platforms, respectively. Within discussions of algorithmic management, there appears to be a consensus that such algorithms benefit the managers of the given organization (Walker et al., 2021; Woodcock, 2021). By contrast, the usual assumption on non-enterprise social media is that it is the platforms and their owners who are in charge and benefit from the arrangement (Kopf, 2020). When asking how the algorithms of social media might be regarded less favorably by organizational managers than the algorithms associated with algorithmic management, this is a compelling indicator why: While the former offers managerial control, the latter may come with a perceived threat of a lack of control. This is a point I will return to in the exploration of the central case of this paper: Workplace from Meta.

Case: Meta and Workplace

Case Description

The present article is based on an analysis of a sampling of the corporate communications created by Meta surrounding their enterprise social medium, Workplace. Workplace is in many ways a typical example of such media, which have the stated aim of bringing familiar features from personal social media platforms such as Facebook to bear in terms of internal communication (Leonardi et al., 2013). Workplace presents an interface and affordances for communication for users, which is most likely familiar to them in that it resembles the regular Facebook platform. The enterprise social medium was launched for commercial release in 2016, and has a number of both high-profile and lesser-known customers, who are usually paying for the use of the platform, as opposed to the advertising-funded business models of many of Meta's other platforms. While it is considerably less scrutinized than most of Meta's other ventures, Workplace has attracted some scattered attention from scholars (Schaefer, 2023). This includes discussions of how users manage their self-presentation on this medium (Bagger, 2023), although this is notably often done with consideration for human, rather than non-human co-workers (Bagger, 2021). However, the role of algorithms and artificial intelligence thus remains underdiscussed in this case, as it does with enterprise social media in general.

While less popular than leading rival enterprise social media (Zaveri, 2021), the medium is particularly interesting for its close relation to Meta Platforms Inc. In the terminology of case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006), Workplace represents both a *critical* and *extreme* case of studying the interrelation between mediated organizational communications and artificial intelligence in the form of algorithmic content curation. It is extreme insofar as it illustrates a "dramatic" instance of a particular type of case, due to its direct proximity to Meta Platforms Inc. This company is both heavily involved in several social media platforms and has also ventured into other seemingly cutting-edge uses of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (Egliston & Carter, 2022). Meta's platforms, most notably Facebook and Instagram, have been controversial for, among other things, the role that their proprietary algorithms have played in the communication landscape (Bucher, 2012; Caplan & boyd, 2018). In addition to this, Workplace is also a "critical case" in that it is the expected site of a certain finding, namely some degree of frankness about the algorithmic nature of communication on the platform. This might seem counterintuitive, as plenty of scholarship has highlighted how social media companies have a concerted interest in presenting themselves as neutral intermediaries in human communication to both the public and members of the legislature (Gillespie, 2010; Napoli & Caplan, 2018). However, this datafication and ostensible algorithmic influencing of user behavior is precisely the selling point that Meta has to its commercial partners and advertisers (Zuboff, 2019). Additionally, comments by Meta representatives have confirmed that there is at least some algorithmic content curation happening on Workplace (Lunden & Constine, 2018).

Although we might expect Meta to de-emphasize their own role in shaping user behavior when communicating with the public, we also expect them to be equally adamant in emphasizing this when discussing it with potential commercial partners. This is where corporate communication texts offer an interesting avenue for threading the needle, as they address multiple audiences, as I will discuss in the next section.

Data collection

The data materials that form the foundation for this article are the YouTube videos present on Workplace from Meta's own YouTube channel (now rebranded as "Meta for Work") and their podcast series The Workplace Effect. This data selection forms part of the data collection for a larger project (Bagger, 2022), although the analysis presented here is original. These were archived by the author up until the fall of 2022 and cover a period all the way back to 2016. The materials were thus originally steadily published on a timeline covering several public relations scandals surrounding Meta companies and their algorithms (Larsen, 2022; Weiss-Blatt, 2021), the disruption of working life presented by COVID-19 (Bagger & Lomborg, 2021) and include their rebranding to being "Meta".

In total, this article is based on the 23 podcast episodes and 123 YouTube videos that constitute the totality of Meta's Workplace-specific output on the channels. All these

were collected to comprehensively cover these venues of communication. This was at the expense of other publicly available materials on channels such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (now X). I approach these as examples of corporate communication, a genre characterized by spanning the division between external and internal communication, and thus for potentially addressing multiple audiences, not unlike so much other communication via social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011). My focus on videos and podcasts was due to their longform and often dialogue- or interview-driven structure, which I expected to potentially yield interesting insights.

Limitations and strengths of the data materials

An obvious limitation of relying on this publicly available communication is that it does not allow us any proprietary information or any insight into how Meta might more directly communicate with managers about the use of artificial intelligence and algorithms on Workplace. This is a deliberate choice on my part, mainly due to the many ethical concerns raised by the appearance of such (often leaked) data and the resulting implications for scholarship relying upon these (Larsen, 2022).

Furthermore, my main research interest is in how the topic of algorithms and artificial intelligence is *publicly presented*. This does not mean that I accept this public presentation as directly representing reality but rather as a deliberate attempt at strategic communication on Meta's behalf. While corporate communications are not likely to reveal much in terms of salacious or embarrassing details about a particular product or industry, they can serve as a valuable insight into how a company wishes to be perceived, or for their products to be perceived. In other words, corporate communications tend to be quite explicit in their intended *dominant* reading (Hall, 1980). Accordingly, as has been demonstrated by other scholars (Hoffmann et al., 2018; Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019), such public communications present a ripe target for the critical investigator.

Method of analysis

Familiarization and summarizing of materials

Having collected the materials, I began a process of general familiarization with and subsequent summarizing of the contents of the materials. The initial familiarization phase of the analysis (described in more detail below) was done while these materials were still in their video or audio form. The more systematic summarizing and detailed analysis was done on machine transcriptions using a variant of OpenAI's Whisper system (Radford et al., 2022). While this presents the disadvantage of losing some of the multimodal nuances of the materials, it did make this rather large dataset somewhat more manageable and searchable.

The initial familiarization involved a relatively unstructured open engagement with the materials, and the summarizing was a more concerted phase of systematically going

through the materials to list out the two or three most prominent "selling points" of Workplace highlighted in each of the items of analysis. These were summarized along the lines of "Workplace can help generate a global culture and community in an organization", "Workplace can be an enabler of hybrid working" or "Workplace can facilitate two-way communication and employee engagement".

While this approach bears some similarity to a grounded or inductive approach to analysis (e.g. Charmaz, 2014), this is a term I am hesitant to use as I subscribe to the maxim that all observation is "theory-laden" (Deutsch, 2011, p. 165). Accordingly, inquiry is always inquiry *about* something, which in turn informs the choice of case and materials (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this inquiry, this meant that I approached these as examples of corporate communication meant to not only sell Workplace to potential customers or enlighten existing customers but also to negotiate Meta's position and legitimacy in the global business landscape more broadly. As might be expected, this led to a large set of analytic themes, which pointed in quite a few directions.

Process: Impasse, mystery construction and abductive turn

Having laid out the many general trends and themes of the empirical materials under scrutiny, I was faced with the common prospect of being stumped by the available information and the possible directions to pursue (see also Alvesson & Kärremann, 2011), a feeling of having "lost sight" of the project at hand, at least enough to be unclear about the way forward. Here, a reliance on the process description of qualitative research favored by certain areas of management scholarship proved a useful aid in jumpstarting out of this impasse.

Following Locke, Golden-Biddle and Feldman (2008), I resorted to turning this doubt into a generative process, namely by localizing a specific problem and constructing a *mystery* surrounding the problem with the available data (Alvesson & Kärremann, 2011), which would then facilitate me as a researcher to construct a detective narrative of sorts (Czarnikawska, 1999). In this instance, I opted to pursue the mystery of "whatever happened to the algorithm?" This involved setting aside (at least for now) many of the otherwise interesting themes that had emerged during the initial coding process. As such, otherwise interesting topics such as the metaverse, diversity and equity, and employee education programs were not given any in-depth consideration.

The Mystery of the Missing Algorithm

In pursuing the algorithm, my focus was especially on locating mentions of automation, the machinic shaping of communication, and artificial intelligence as it pertained to communicative processes. As such, the texts were searched for keywords such as "artificial intelligence", "ai", "autom*", "data", "bot", "*feed", and "algorithm*". For the reasons laid out in the previous sections, I had an expectation that the algorithmic nature of the Workplace platform would be either explicitly discussed or, at the very least, handwaved away.

Instead, what I found was a more scattered discussion. Having collated these explicit mentions, I went on to review and select other findings that referenced the algorithmic shaping of communication on Workplace more obliquely, such as manager-specific features for broadcasting communication.

To systematize and make sense of these findings, the analysis took a relatively *abductive* turn, shifting back and forth between existing concepts in the literature and emic categories (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). In terms of research literature, this involved returning to the categories outlined in the research review above (communicating about, with and through artificial intelligence, respectively). After using this as a systematic way of "pursuing" the algorithm through the materials, I was faced with the challenge of making sense of *why* the algorithm had been communicated in this form. This is where I turned to engage with the critical study of management (Fleming, 2019) and the critical study of artificial intelligence (Munn, 2022), to bring their insights to bear on the findings.

In the end, it was left to me to offer up an explanation of my findings, in answer to the original research question. This was ultimately a process of "abductive reasoning" insofar as it was the generation of a probable answer in accordance with the data and theory at hand (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008). While such abductive processes might produce "no conclusions more definite than a conjecture" (Charles Sanders Peirce, quoted in Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008, p. 909), the obvious answer to this is that conjectures are all we may ever hope for in our quest for knowledge (Popper, 2002). The task then becomes that of making these conclusions as solid as circumstances allow, among other things by not only a structured approach to our empirical materials (Alvesson & Kärremann, 2011) but also to the process of providing explanations itself.

Findings

Communicating about "artificial intelligence" – speaking it into and out of being

How does Meta then communicate about the algorithms underpinning their Workplace platform? The short answer is that they mostly avoid doing so, at least directly. The fact that an algorithm may be shaping the communication is mentioned in none of the podcasts, and only a single YouTube video makes direct mention of this, briefly:

> "…so within […] the algorithm that surfaces content on to the newsfeed what it will actually do is if you're talking about a certain subject or you're following a certain person then any content from open groups can actually come onto that newsfeed and what that means is that it's a great way of surfacing knowledge conversations that perhaps otherwise you wouldn't have actually seen."
>
> (Workplace from Meta, 2017)

This is a rare instance in which the algorithm is mentioned explicitly, and where it is ascribed the role of something that acts against barriers of communication and informa-

tion. This is congruent with how the medium of Workplace is paradoxically sold, at least in part, on its unobtrusiveness, as I will delve further into below. When other mention is made of the (algorithmically curated) newsfeed, it is most likely to be a recommendation along the lines that companies should “break up the newsfeed [by posting] something that’s just a bit upbeat and positive amongst the relative doom and gloom around the country and the world” (The Workplace Effect, 2021b). This quote was from a company during the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic but it is noticeable how the “doom and gloom” is described as something external to both the company as such (“the country and the world”) and also at least in part external to the newsfeed of the company itself. This contrasts interestingly with how the algorithmically curated content of regular social media platforms is usually understood as contributing to a sense of doom (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021b).

The overall emphasis in the materials is on the selling points of Workplace related to, for instance, “connecting frontline and remote workers [via Workplace]”, “replacing e-mail as means of communication” and “improving bottom-up and top-down communication”. In a broad sense, Workplace is presented as a means of facilitating smooth and friction-free communication across all levels of a given organization. As one spokesperson for a customer organization put it:

> “We wanted something that was familiar to everybody. There wasn’t time to introduce a system that would require training and a rollout and an implementation programme and of course Workplace gave us that straight away”.
>
> (The Workplace Effect, 2023)

As such, the medium is marketed for its unobtrusiveness. This is congruent with other discussions of the stated purpose of other media products, as deduced by their external communication (Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2018), and theoretically resonant with the above-discussed theoretical ideas of media either being hindrances to true communication or melting away and becoming conduits of pure, unhindered communication (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Peters, 1989).

At several points throughout the materials, spokespeople for Meta highlight the importance of moving away from “broadcast”-style communication within organizations. Presumably, this is meant to encompass an understanding of organizational communication where management, leadership, and executives communicate one-to-many throughout the firm, even if they are “receiving bottoms-up [sic] feedback” (Meta for Work, 2018a). This understanding of organizational communication is contrasted with the desirability of either moving on to a paradigm of “collaboration”, where the emphasis is on “managing teams and working as communities” (Meta for Work, 2018a) as opposed to a more hierarchical view of management and organization, or moving on to an ideal of “automation” of internal communication, where “business processes [are made] more efficient” (Meta for Work, 2018a). However, as I will draw out in the following sections, both

visions of transformation are sold with tacit acknowledgment that one-to-many communication is still possible, even if the face of algorithmic curation and artificial interlocutors.

Communicating with "artificial intelligence" – the subservient social bot and the remaining sociality

The most visible use of artificial intelligence-supported features of Workplace is in the form of the many bot integrations the platform offers. In contrast to the usual negative valence of bots on regular social media, the bots on Workplace were generally framed as a functional part of automating processes and workflows. As such, they fit the general idea of what might be termed the "robot-as-servant" archetype (Jordan, 2016, p. 56), a way of serving the "needs of human communication" mentioned by Hepp (2020, p. 1411).

Such bots play several roles in the materials, including onboarding new employees through chat interfaces, facilitating learning, and taking surveys of employee attitudes and moods. They thus play a dual role of *collecting* information about workers and *reducing* their need to communicate with other workers about routine tasks. An example from one spokesperson in a company using Workplace is illustrative:

> "[W]e've launched a chatbot for technology services for HR services and that's really made improvement […] I wouldn't give all credit to the platform, but we've seen a 60 percent drop in informational requests."
>
> (Workplace from Meta, 2018b)

In the above quote, a drop in information requests is equated with an increase in communicative efficiency. Bots are framed as taking over unnecessary communicative tasks. Whether this somehow means a reduction in human communicators as well is never given any explicit consideration within the materials under analysis. However, if we consider the usual (and often gendered) distinction between information-seeking and relational communication online (Baym, 2015; Lomborg, 2014), Meta and their products arguably mostly make their bones on the latter. As such, in the empirical materials, an increase in communicative efficiency with Workplace is usually linked with an increased emphasis on "culture" among the humans working in the company, as exemplified in the quote below:

> "All of our bots are all within the same purpose of why we launched Workplace in terms of driving a culture of community, but also driving efficiencies and openness and access to information and processes that were probably a little bit more harder [sic] before we had Workplace."
>
> (The Workplace Effect, 2021)

Both the goal of Workplace as such, and the bots that users interact with, are thus also congruent with the overall vision of making the communicative medium almost wither away (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Peters, 1989). The "culture of community" that is

supposed to arise from this is also congruent with the self-perception of companies like Meta in particular, where the internal communication "encourage[s] workers to imagine the company as a community [...] centered on the celebration of individual creativity" (Turner, 2018, p. 54). However, as I will discuss further in the next section, this friction-free vision of communication is exactly what algorithmic media *do not* provide, at least according to some scholars.

Communicating through artificial intelligence – speaking over the algorithm

This brings me back to the topic of algorithmically shaped communication, a feature of regular social media, and yet an underdiscussed issue on enterprise social media, including the corporate communication surrounding Workplace. Above, I discussed how communicative bots, one of the most visible applications of organizational artificial intelligence, were framed as subservient, and eliminating communicative fluff and friction. Interestingly however, communicative bots are also frequently framed as supporting the more "broadcast"-style communication or, in other words, circumventing many of the ideals of "automated" or "collaborative" modes of organizational communication, to use Meta's own terms.

In such examples, bots are seen as a tool by the professional communicators (and managers) of a given organization to break through the noise and habits of Workplace communication. One example from a United Kingdom food chain is illustrative:

> "We have our collaborator bot, which does all of our sort of one-way communication. Because we know that the majority of people that are using Workplace on our frontline, they're using it to talk to each other on their teams, in their team chats, in their group chats, or one-on-one chat. They're not necessarily focusing on the feed all the time. So, when we're doing really important comms, we have a live stream, [which then] gets edited down, goes into a post. Then we follow that up again with a message through the chatbot so that we know that we're getting people wherever they are and what they're looking at."
>
> (The Workplace Effect, 2020)

Notice the problems that the bots are supposed to solve in the above: Creating efficient one-way communication that is supposed to reach all members of the organization regardless of their self-organization and communicative habits. This also presents an interesting tension when read alongside Meta's above dichotomy of paradigms of organizational communication. The bots are constructed to facilitate top-down one-way communication. While it is not outright framed as undesirable that people are "in their team chats, in their group chats, or one-on-one chat[s]", places where they might be "working as communities", the ability to contact workers from above is still highlighted as paramount. This is also evident in many of the materials emphasizing managers' abilities to boost their own posts and perform "broadcast"-style communicative genres such as company-wide livestreams. As such, while the algorithmic shaping of communication on

Workplace is rarely mentioned outright, several of the features highlighted in the materials assure us that such algorithmically shaped communication can be *overcome*.

Summary of findings: Communicating around artificial intelligence
My analysis of the corporate communication surrounding Workplace from Meta, with particular attention to artificial intelligence, revealed the following: Workplace is, like many other Meta products, reliant upon algorithmic curation of the communication (Bucher, 2012; Lunden & Constine, 2018). However, this aspect is downplayed in their corporate communication surrounding Workplace. Artificial intelligence, at least in the form of the algorithmic curation and moderation of content, is not *communicated about*. Insofar as artificial intelligence is *communicated about*, it is constructed in the form of communicative bots, which are there to eliminate unnecessary communicative tasks and to boost the communication of managers and key personnel. Interestingly, this means that the most obvious use of artificial intelligence in the materials (communicative bots) is generally for the explicit purpose of overriding the *least visible* use of artificial intelligence (the algorithmic curation of communication). In the next section of this article, I propose some reasons why this might be the case.

Discussion

My finding in this article is that the algorithmically shaped nature of communication via Workplace is downplayed in the marketing materials for the platform. This is because the presence of these algorithms does not neatly fit into either of the dominant paradigms of what role algorithmic curation is supposed to play in either the everyday context of social media or in the structured context of working life.

We can propose many broad reasons why algorithms in general are deemphasized in the corporate communication surrounding Workplace. Among other things, there are the several public relations scandals that companies like Meta have faced. These scandals are, to varying degrees, associated with the (algorithmic) curation of their content (Weiss-Blatt, 2021). More prominently, following the common "black box" metaphor of describing the lack of insight into the workings of algorithms (Pasquale, 2015), we can argue that algorithms shaping the communication on digital platforms are both proprietary and inscrutable (see also Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021a). This would provide a compelling reason for leaving them out of public communication. Indeed, this would be in line with the broader public-facing communication of Meta, which tends to emphasize unfettered connectivity between users (Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2018)

However, if the communicative ideal of media like Workplace, emerging from Silicon Valley tech companies, is that they will allow "[e]xisting social, political and legal power structures [to] wither away replaced by unfettered interactions" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 7), this presents at least two problems. Firstly, the algorithmic nature of commu-

nication via such media shows that the "emancipation" or "unfettered interaction" promised by such media is not quite as advertised (Lomborg, 2017, p. 10). While this has been discussed as a problem for both ordinary workers and users (Bucher, 2012), it is no less of a problem for organizations seeking to mold and control their communication, or indeed for the workers within such organizations. Secondly, if the media were to work as promised, I would argue that we might well wonder whether "economic" and "organizational" power structures are also up for withering away. If so, this is understandably also not quite such an appealing proposition for the managers and executives deciding whether to implement such media. As such, a more novel part of the explanation for the absence of discussions of the algorithms underlying Workplace may be that such algorithms present ambiguities to existing organizational power structures.

The study of organizational communication has a long history of paying attention to how the means of communication used in working life also shape this domain (e.g. Yates & Orlikowski, 2007). More recently, some organizational scholars have even argued for the fundamental role that media and technology play in shaping organizations (Andrijasevic et al., 2021; Beyes et al., 2022). Crucially, critical scholarship on organizations and labor reminds us (e.g. Anderson, 2017; Fleming, 2019) that working life is often an area of life characterized by power imbalances, while critical scholarship on AI demonstrates that such power imbalances are often reified or exacerbated with the implementation of algorithmic technologies (Munn, 2022; Walker, Fleming & Berti, 2021).

What I have used the present case to argue is that it is not just workers as such who are faced with a potential problem of communication when algorithmic enterprise social media are introduced into working life. As has been tacitly implied by the materials under analysis, managers seemingly also need to be assured that they will not lose their communicative capabilities via these algorithmic media. If AI and algorithms are communicatively framed as the solution to a problem (Katzenbach, 2021), does the elision of algorithms mean that they might *present* a problem? In the case of Workplace, this appears to be a factor. It seems almost ironic but the main thing Workplace wants to sell itself as – a conduit for unfettered communication (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Peters, 1989) – is the one thing that algorithmic media can never be (Gillespie, 2010; Natale, 2021a)

It remains an empirical question exactly what effect the algorithmic shaping of internal communications may have in any given organization (Lunze, 2014). What this study has underlined is that the ambiguities surrounding how algorithms may shape and influence communication may not just be limited to workers (cf. Walker et al., 2021) but may also extend to managers. As such, in the "selling" of a medium like Workplace, the mundane "artificial intelligence" that underlies the medium is de-emphasized, in stark contrast to the ways artificial intelligence is usually communicated (cf. Katzenbach, 2021).

Much has been done to discursively uncover how artificial intelligence and ensuing technological changes are constructed as *inevitable*. As one countermove to this, scholars have done much to underline how artificial intelligence is often *indeterminate* or *imagi-*

nary in these narratives. Based on this case study, my suggestion for further empirical research would be to seek out further instances of how "artificial intelligence" (as indeterminate as that moniker may be) is *invisibilized*, and what this might help us explain about broader media-related transformations of society.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the corporate communication surrounding Meta's Workplace platform, specifically with an emphasis on how "artificial intelligence" in general and "algorithms" in particular are presented in relation to its platform. Workplace sits at an intersection of two areas where the study of "algorithms" as a subset of the generalized debate about "artificial intelligence" has been quite prominent in recent years, namely, the study of working life (e.g. algorithmic management and control) and the study of social media (as algorithmic systems). Workplace represents a medium underpinned by mundane artificial intelligence in the form of algorithmic content curation (Lunden & Constine, 2018), not unlike the regular Facebook platform (Bucher, 2012). Situated in between these two areas of study, Workplace highlights a potential incommensurability between what role algorithms (as artificial intelligence) are supposed to play in these respective arenas. "Artificial intelligences" such as chatbots are highlighted as examples of *communicating with artificial intelligence*. On the other hand, the algorithmic nature of content curation the Workplace platform is barely alluded to, only insofar as managers and executives are offered tools to still be able to perform one-way communication to all members of a given company.

I attribute this elision of the algorithmic nature of Workplace to the fact that it sits uncomfortably between the areas of algorithmic media and algorithmic management and accordingly highlights a fundamental tension between the two. Acknowledging the algorithmic curation of communication via Workplace would allow this communication to appear unruly. This contrasts with many of the other applications of algorithms in managerial practices, which tacitly promise if not more managerial control of workers' activities, then at least more efficiency (Nyman et al., 2023). As such, the discussion of a medium like Workplace, and its underlying algorithmic shaping of communication may clash with existing organizational structures and interests, namely maintaining the ability for managers to unilaterally communicate, and make sure their message is received. The case at hand is thus a reminder that when new media are to "sell themselves" to existing organizational structures, the possibility of maintaining existing communicative power appears to be a definite selling point. This is a point worth bearing in mind when the emancipatory or restrictive tendencies of new artificial intelligence technologies are introduced into working life.

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