Translated excerpt

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Hyperreaktiv
Wie in Sozialen Medien um Deutungsmacht gekämpft wird

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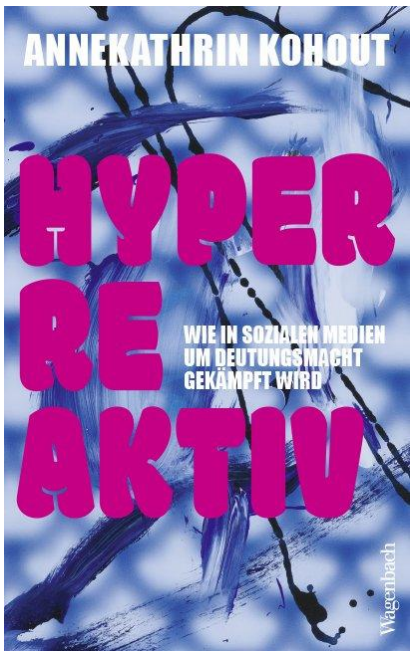
Hyperreactive
How social media is vying for the power of interpretation

Translated by Zaia Alexander



FOREWORD: REACTION IS KING!

Who hasn’t been there before: barely has the day begun, and you've already clicked through dozens of posts and stories, liked a meme, hesitated over whether you should like a meme, read way too many comments and messages (liked a few), gotten furious at a total stranger, not to mention all of the live ticker messages – and to make matters worse, you've accidentally clicked on an ad, which means you'll now be bombarded by Thermomix accessories for months. We users react before we think. We like before we feel. And it enrages us that everybody else is doing exactly the same thing. The sheer mass of daily information flying in often seems both trivial and overwhelming. It's as if we are stuck in reaction mode – unable to genuinely act autonomously or creatively.

Welcome to the reaction culture! In the digital world, reactions are our primary form of communicating. We like, share, comment, and rate – constantly, everywhere, and usually within seconds. It is no longer the content itself that counts, but rather our response to the content which determines what is seen, which debates get escalated, and what narratives dominate the conversation.

Of course, reactions have always been integral to the dynamics of cultural, political, and economic discourse. Societies react to crises, movements form in response to grievances, and art and pop culture are often a refutation and reaction to their predecessors. The main difference, thanks to digital technologies, lies in the unprecedented acceleration and intensification of these processes. Social media has created a permanent feedback loop in which every action can provoke immediate global reactions. The reality of spatial and temporal limits that once served as a buffer has been

eradicated: a local event can trigger waves of global protest within hours, as cultural trends spread across continents in real time. This dynamic is being systematically reinforced by algorithms that specifically prioritize reaction-intensive content. As a result, the human tendency to react has turned into a key principle of commerce: in the digital attention economy, reactions have grown to be the most valued currency: Reaction is King!

Reaction culture manifests itself in standard formats such as memes, stitches, reaction videos, and GIFs. They all follow a similar principle: instead of creating exclusively original content, producers draw on existing material that they vary and comment upon. What was once considered an avant-garde strategy in 20th-century art—from Marcel Duchamp's readymades, to Andy Warhol's affirmative pop art, to appropriation art à la Richard Prince—has now turned into a ubiquitous mode of communication.

In the early days of comment culture, circa late 1990s, users felt a sense of empowerment, believing they were participants of news and magazine websites or forums specifically designed for that purpose. Things have changed since then. Many people feel passive, powerless, trapped in a cycle of reaction – individually, but also on a collective and societal level, which inevitably leads to a negative self-image: Today, political parties and governments are often accused of failing to set the agenda, that instead they are merely reacting to developments and whims that have been formed within the digital public sphere – irregardless whether these trends had been initiated by groups representing civil society or by populist movements. Examples of this range from social activists, who advocate identity-based political debates, or their opposite, groups pressured by right-wing parties that espouse policies around migration in response to pressure from right-wing parties. This sentiment reveals more than just digital overwhelm. It is symptomatic of a destabilized society. The term “transformation fatigue” describes the conflict between the pressure to constantly adapt and the need for self-determined action.

In the following pages, I would like to demonstrate how "reaction culture" is more than a mere side effect of digital acceleration. In fact, reaction culture has evolved into a structural problem that is deeply embedded inside the architecture of the platforms. Social media has fundamentally altered how we consume, evaluate, and disseminate information. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, Bluesky, and Twitter/X not only shape user's everyday life, but increasingly influence emerging cultural and political debates that previously had been grappled with and formatted through other media such as newspapers and television. Likes, shares, and comments are no longer

just casual actions—they drive and shape digital communication. Reactions are more than just clicks. They reflect power, both individually and collectively.

The classic arenas of political and social discourse have shifted to the digital world: the struggle over who has the power of interpretation – often referred to as ‘information wars’ – is now being fought in timelines, comment columns, and chat groups. By no means are just a few experts from politics or journalism involved in the discussion, but potentially all of us. Indeed, anybody who likes, shares, or comments is actively participating and negotiating what is being transmitted in the digital public sphere. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we users shape the discourse of our time through our reactions. As author Friedemann Karig aptly put it in a commentary about terrorist image propaganda: "With every like, every retweet, every concerned comment, we determine how successful the psychological warfare of terror is.”

Two rather extreme views often dominate the discourse around users. On the one hand, there is the image of the passive, easily influenced masses “insufficiently complex as swarms or hordes”: This image depicts users as receptive consumers, who passively absorb information and content, who are easily influenced by algorithms, advertising, or fake news, not to mention emotional or sensationalist content. On the other hand, there is the image of a manipulative (individual) actor who deliberately spreads disinformation in order to disrupt or influence discourse. In this image, a user not only acts as part of a reactive, controllable swarm, but as a proactive individual who intentionally shapes narratives according to their agenda and drives political debates in the digital world.

These two images are shaping a number of debates around fake news, trolls, and right-wing populist movements on social media. Yet as two extreme poles that prove difficult to reconcile, they also obscure a measured view of reality. Most of us who trawl through our Instagram, X, or TikTok feeds every day, or create our own content, probably would not classify ourselves as either of these two extremes. We ordinary users are neither mindless victims of algorithms nor perfidious deceivers.

Many users approach social media in a reflective and critical manner. They question algorithms, understand how clickbait functions, and recognize disinformation—sometimes with playful ease. Many people are media literate and have a solid grasp of everyday content. Formats such as before-and-after photos, Instagram vs. real life memes, filters and editing, as well as accounts that parody

these practices testify to a relatively enlightened approach to manipulative content. Online discussions often revolve around the extent to which algorithms can or cannot be influenced.

Our awareness about manipulation often ends when it comes to our own role in the process. Do we take responsibility for the things we like, share, comment on, interpret? The image of the passive user is proof of our failure to take responsibility. The image of the manipulative user shows how a specific responsibility is actively being denied from the get-go. People who feel they belong to neither of these types rarely question their own complicity – unjustly so in my opinion. After all, it is not just money-hungry companies or power-hungry individuals who are responsible for these forms of manipulation, nor is it solely the PR people, troll armies, or bots that are responsible for "roughening" the culture of debate, for the "great irritability," "crisis of confidence," "polarized society." We users also must take responsibility for it. This finding does not aim to assign blame or accuse anybody. On the contrary! This realization should not be seen as a burden, but also as an opportunity. If you are part of the problem, you can also be part of the solution. Even if the setting and conditions are beyond your control: We users are not merely observers, but also shape events through our reactions—sometimes without realizing it, sometimes consciously, even strategically.

Social media has turned into a battleground for the fight to control the narrative. That may sound harsh, but it accurately describes the behavior of many people online. Whether in evaluating current events of war, "correct" feminism, or the latest lifestyle trends, every debate is driven forward or stifled by reactions. When Elon Musk shares fake news with his more than 200 million followers, who in turn emulate him and support and spread his content through their reactions, bullshit turns into a national pastime.

The first part of this book examines this dynamic. My intent is to demonstrate how discourses are formed in reaction culture and why misunderstandings, distrust, and outrage have turned into integral parts of the digital public sphere. Why do so many people feel triggered all the time? Why does every message immediately turn into an occasion for positioning and counter-positioning? How is it that a single like can lead to the end of a career? In the second part, I turn to the next level of escalation: a particularly problematic form of reaction that I call *hyperinterpretation*. By hyperinterpretation, I am referring to a technique that mimics hermeneutic, forensic, and investigative methods in order to deliberately instrumentalize content. When Greta Thunberg's stuffed animal is suddenly interpreted as an anti-Semitic symbol, when every hand movement of a politician is analyzed for hidden messages, when a conspiracy theory is constructed from a

billboard —these are no longer harmless misunderstandings. Reactions can become an extremely effective weapon in the digital battle for who has the power to shape the narrative.

Hyperinterpretation works contrary to content, rather than with it, it damages not only what is deliberately misinterpreted, but also the tools of knowledge themselves. The boundaries between serious analysis and deliberate distortion are growing blurred. What was once considered critical inquiry has now transformed into the foundation for conspiracy theories or destructive narratives. And once content has been hyperinterpreted, it can rarely be fully rehabilitated—often subsequent corrections or further context fails to reach a wider public, nor can it compete with the emotionalizing power of the original misinterpretation.

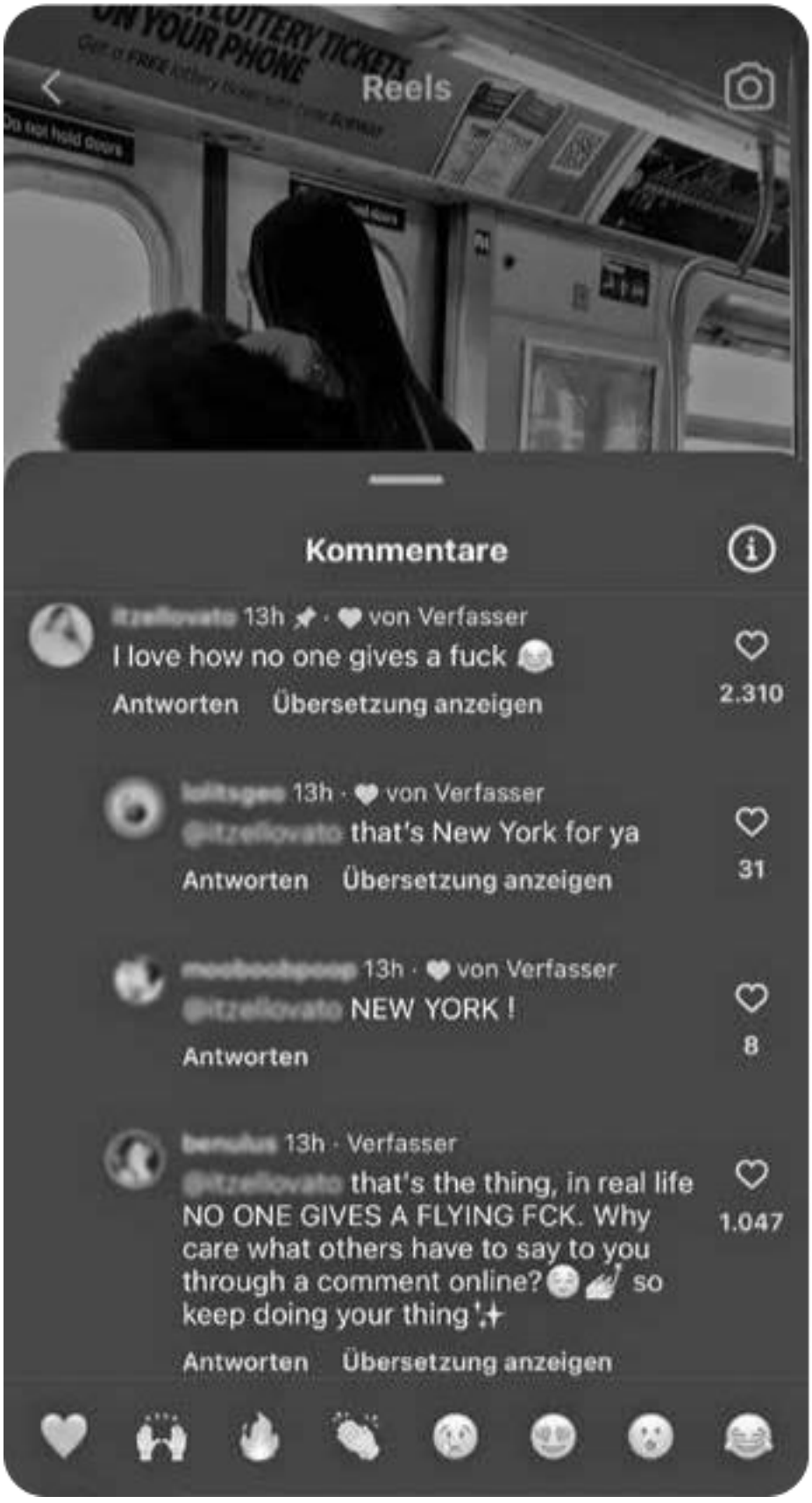
In this atmosphere, mistrust turns into the default mode of reception. Nothing can stand on its own any longer—each image, text, video turns into a potential site for projections, interpretations, or suspicious fact. As much as the culture of reaction may promote creativity and "engagement," it is also responsible for creating a culture of relentless questioning and opposition. While users wage war against each other, or form communities as a result of hyperinterpretation, they unconsciously undermine the foundations of a shared reality. The result is a vicious cycle: first, everything gets called into question, then the new "truths" get sold. The more fractured the meaning, the greater the hunger grows for a simplistic reading—and this in turn creates a flourishing market for such interpretations.

Back in the day, advertising was seen as a vehicle to create artificial needs for products that solved the artificial problems. Today, social media platforms systematically produce a deficit of meaning – through mistrust, doubt, scandalization – in order to replace those empty spaces with new interpretations, influencer truths, or conspiracy narratives.

How has it come to this? How can we grasp the mechanisms of this new culture of reaction? And are there ways to distance ourselves from destructive hyperinterpretation and return to a more productive form of digital exchange?

These are questions I wish to explore in this book.

I. WELCOME TO THE REACTION CULTURE



Speech without Response

The other day, I ran across a comment on Instagram that I couldn't help but *like*.
It appeared below a reel showing a typical example of 'Instagram vs. Reality': a young woman is performing a dance in the subway that goes viral. In the first part of the video, we see the scene through the lens of her smartphone camera – perfectly choreographed, shot, and edited. In the second part, we are shown how the video was made, i.e. we are watching from a distance as the creator shoots the video. The appeal of such reels lies in the viewer getting a peek behind the curtain of a professionally staged social media event. Although we all know that such scenes have been shot somewhere in the real world, it is strange and fascinating to watch a person dancing in public – especially since they are not doing so for people in an analog *real-life* situation, but solely for the camera and an invisible crowd of viewers on the internet.

The comments grew into an insightful discussion. Users were delighted—not so much by the dancer, but by the passengers' indifference to the action being played out in front of them: when the music and performance began, nobody bothered to look up; instead they were engrossed in their smartphones, preferring digital space to the analog. It was amazing to see how easily a person can shoot reels in a New York subway without so much as a single curious glance, or nasty comment from anybody! The euphoric creator of the reel commented about the experience with a striking observation that made me smile: "In real life, nobody is bothered by something like this. Nobody would dare judge you negatively or insult you. So why listen to the online comments? Just keep doing your thing!"

A refreshing plea that reminded me how different things had been when I was growing up:
"Nobody cared about that sort of thing online, "Because in the early days of the internet, the very opposite held true: it wasn't "real life" that provided a safe space from social pressure, rather it was online. As teenagers of the millennial generation, we were constantly exposed to comments about our appearance or behavior at school. By contrast, in the early forums and social networks we could be lighthearted—at least some of us. As New York artist, writer, and curator Legacy Russell aptly put it in her cult book *Glitch Feminism*: "I was young: Black, female, feminine, queer. There was no respite from this pressure; the world around me never let me forget these identity markers. But online, I could be anything I wanted. The internet offered a space for experimentation, for playing with different identities, testing social boundaries." A lot has changed since then.

The early days of internet culture continues to fascinate people today. Recently, a follower wrote me a message on Instagram: "Unfortunately, I was born in 2005, which means I never got to experience lots of cool portals like SchülerVZ ...I hate Insta, Snapchat, etc. I would much rather have the old Facebook feeling." That got me thinking about the evolution of social media. I didn't want to idealize anything, so I hesitated to reply that I also sometimes miss those days, the easygoing nature of the emerging world of social media. The experimentation, networking playfully with strangers, the constant surprises of surfing through completely unexpected content (does anyone even recall Tumblr?). Back then, the daily feeds had relatively little to do with politics or activism – but above all, there weren't dozens or even hundreds of comments beneath the posts, and if there were, they were far less malicious, angry, or spiteful. Nowadays, the mood is altogether different, characterized by uncertainty, outrage, frustration, and fear – even though there are, of course, still outstanding content creators, great memes, and clever TikToks that nobody could have imagined in their wildest dreams fifteen years ago.

On social media, “Homo narrans has grown into a turbo-storyteller, who can produce more stories about themselves than ever before,” wrote Samira El Ouassil and Friedemann Karig in their book "Erzählende Affen" (cf. Storytelling Apes). But this “Homo narrans” does not stop at mere self-narratives. More than ever, and with greater confidence, they also shape the cultural, social, and political narratives of our day, both large and small. No longer is it solely a few individuals in gatekeeper positions who are controlling the narrative. In theory, anybody can play a part in the process—and this has not only led to democratization—it is also being misused for a variety of reasons and for a variety of ends. People who actively participate in shaping discourses rarely are narrating their own stories. In most cases they are reacting constructively or destructively to what already exists.

Jean Baudrillard termed 20th century mass media as “Speech without response,” which describes a form of communication that does not allow for feedback. It is linear, one-sided, and transmitted from top to bottom. Viewers consume, are passive, and do not interact. According to his diagnosis, this media architecture makes communication structurally impossible. Social media has given us a profound alternative, indeed made it possible to respond! Everybody is allowed to react, comment, get involved – a seeming triumph of participation.

Yet, what had started as an act of liberation quickly transformed into its opposite. Today's online communication can be described as response without speech – a culture wherein content is “un-freezable." It has no permanence, vanishes behind an avalanche of reactions, indeed, is literally gutted by its reception, while the responses gain a life all their own. They replace what they had originally been responding to, and turn into the new object of attention. The original “speech” – a video, a text, an image – becomes a mere projection screen, a trigger. The original message barely plays a role anymore. All that counts is that something was said – so that it can finally be responded to.

GET FEEDBACK OR IT DIDN’T HAPPEN

Lots of people collect things—some seriously and systematically, others more intuitively. Often it depends on what is being collected. I collect screenshots. There are people who have collections of stamps, coins, or vintage records. I archive digital snapshots: an absurd comment, a viral meme, a bizarre discussion. I've been doing this for quite some time now. The subjects have changed drastically over the years. Not surprising, given our digital devices and that user interfaces, designs, and content also have changed. For example, I had documented Miley Cyrus' 420 weed phase on Instagram. Once there was a live-streaming platform called Periscope: I have endless screenshots of American self-promoters singing, dancing, or just talking—in their beds, cars, on the street, or in kindergarten. Today, of course, that is nothing special. Today, we have TikTok.

My more recent collections have mainly been gleaned from Instagram. I think of them as a vivid archive of an increasingly politicized platform. I am particularly fascinated by stories of users, who feel a need to justify their posts. Somebody, a random recipient, or maybe even several followers, were offended by a careless phrase, an allegedly problematic attitude, an overlooked sensitivity. Now it needs further clarification. Such stories are on the rise. In the beginning they were apologetic and factual, today they tend to be more like statements: "I have received the following comments, I can explain why they are unjustified!” Yet stories are one of the few formats on social media where comments are not visible to outsiders. Anybody who posts a story can simply ignore negative reactions – nobody, except for those involved, would ever find out about them. But that's precisely what does not happen. Instead, people proactively clarify, correct, and defend themselves. This constant need to defend oneself could, of course, be explained by the fact that people feel as if

they are being observed and objectified in public – after all, self-image is shaped by the gaze from outside. Such justification stories can be seen as a desire to maintain control over one's own identity or self-narratives. Nonetheless, the pressure to justify oneself also evidences how exposed and vulnerable users feel online, the degree of social pressure, the strain of interpersonal relationships, how great the concern is about not being accepted, and what emotional challenges everyday digital life brings with it. Moreover, people who reveal a lot about themselves and actively participate in online discourse feel there is an expectation for them to constantly keep it up. And not just produce content themselves, but also respond to every reaction, acknowledge every comment, and address every criticism. Nobody is immune to negative feedback—whether public or private. This pressure to justify oneself has increased enormously due to social media. It has never been easier to share opinions and decisions with a large audience. Many users have become minor public personalities. But I would posit that the possibility to constantly give and receive immediate feedback decisively increases this form of pressure. Such feedback, which in pre-digital times had usually come in small doses, now it has turned into the very foundation of every digital existence on the social web: *Get feedback or it didn't happen*.

The term “feedback” originated from cybernetics. It refers to a mechanism that traces the result of an action back to its outcome in order to adjust future actions. If we consider online feedback as a decisive factor for a variety of developments—which is the case now—we are dealing with an initially positive mechanism. Countless sources of feedback means that learning can happen faster than ever before. Of course, there is also the opposite perspective, that human intelligence is threatened because knowledge and skills are increasingly being taken over by digital devices – this is known as "digital amnesia“ or the ”Google effect." Yet, our ability to learn has not diminished – on the contrary: the omnipresence of feedback through likes, comments, ratings, or reactions has enormously accelerated a certain form of learning. This is particularly evident in how online discussions evolve: thanks to real-time feedback, an argument will swiftly be adapted, refuted, rejected, or reformulated. That said, the quality of the feedback does not always play a role.

This trend can lead people to internalize information which, upon closer inspection, was not even worth learning to begin with. For example, when they adopt health tips from influencers simply because they’ve gone viral and received positive feedback – even though the information is medically questionable. Or people who believe they’ve grasped a complex political argument through a few simplistic memes, or they internalize scientific findings via snappy info tiles which

again, upon closer inspection, are grossly simplified or even false. Feedback is not only positive – it can also distort crucial learning processes.

Independent of the content, feedback has grown to be a fundamental driving force on the social web in several ways. On a technical level, feedback determines what algorithms make visible or invisible for users: every like, every comment, the amount of time a person spends each visit, is measured and fed into complex calculations that decide which content is seen by how many users. The platforms are programmed to favor content that generates a lot of "engagement" (a euphemism for anything that makes users click, type, or react), regardless whether this "engagement" is positive or negative. An outrageous post that provokes hundreds of angry comments is classified as "successful" by the algorithm and disseminated accordingly. Artificial intelligence-driven systems and machine learning also fundamentally depend on these feedback loops: they learn from user reactions to determine what "works" and optimize their recommendations accordingly. This technical logic has far-reaching consequences: it rewards not quality or truth, but responses. Content that triggers strong emotions—outrage, fear, enthusiasm—is systematically favored, while nuanced, balanced content vanishes into oblivion.
On an economic level, companies and organizations use the data on feedback to make decisions, predict trends, and tailor strategies. They analyze which product announcements go viral, which advertising campaigns trigger shitstorms, and which influencer collaborations generate the most reactions. For the platforms themselves, this data functions as currency: the more reactions a piece of content generates, the longer users stay online (which means they will be exposed to more advertising) the more revenue they earn. This explains why algorithms are systematically optimized for "engagement" – not for values that are difficult to measure, such as truth, quality, or how they might benefit society.

As a cultural force, feedback influences and shapes communication, content production and, last but not least, community building. Feedback shapes the way individuals and collectives interact, share values, and regulate culture online. Feedback also influences what is considered desirable or acceptable. Positive feedback, i.e. likes, comments, and shares, reinforces certain behaviors, while negative reactions weaken them. That is how social behavior and cultural content are encouraged or sanctioned. Moreover, the oft-scorned narcissism embedded in influencer and selfie culture is a performative side effect of these mechanisms for feedback. The more face in the picture or video, the more likes, the more reach, the more recognition, the more self-assurance.

This is the reason such mechanisms play a major role in digital identity formation, and why they continue to exert an enormous influence on a person's self-image and self-esteem – even in real life (IRL). Since most people have personally experienced the above feedback mechanisms on the internet, they understand their significance and power, and they use them as tools –sometimes intuitively, sometimes strategically.

Conversely, every bit of feedback also conveys an attitude: approval, distance, solidarity, outrage. Feedback is not only related to content; it is also a medium of expression. People who give feedback are saying: I have seen this, I reject it, I belong here, and I can see right through it. Feedback is an abbreviated form of self-disclosure, a mini-presentation of the self, a micro-intervention: fleeting, but not without consequences. The technical systems that manage feedback have evolved into social systems that fundamentally shape our online communication that has created a new form of digital social behavior, wherein giving and receiving feedback isn't an option, it is mandatory.