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).

Reviewed by
Arnab Biswas
Bowling Green State University
Comilla University

In the introduction to **The Rise of the Algorithms: How YouTube and TikTok Conquered the World**, author John M. Jordan raises a thought-provoking question: How is cultural taste-making happening in the current age of the attention economy? He argues that a significant shift has already taken place from traditional sources like newspapers and television networks to digital platforms, where machine learning now decides much of what we read and watch depending on our behavioral data (p. 4).

Jordan contrasts today's attention economy with the earlier era of technological optimism, describing the current landscape as a kind of dystopia. He points out that open discussions on the Internet often turn disgustingly toxic if left unmoderated (p. 5). He concludes the section by promising to explore key questions throughout the book, such as: What will people tolerate, and when might they rebel? What platform practices will cross some legal, cultural, or emotional line? How will we each individually justify the costs of these platforms related to their benefits?
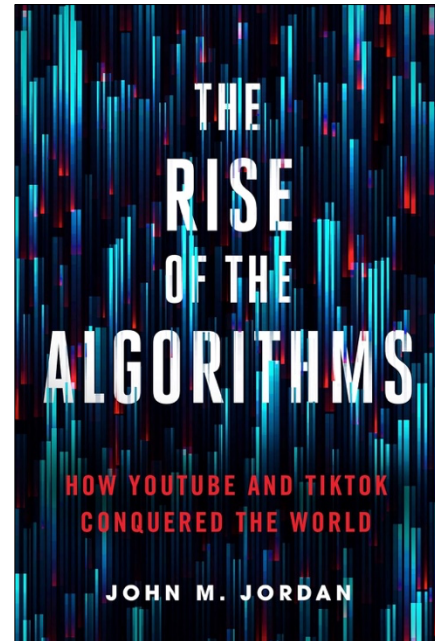
In the first two chapters, Jordan explores how YouTube and TikTok have evolved into dominant "attention factories" that not only serve but also shape user behavior through algorithmic recommendation systems. In "The Big Picture," he emphasizes how these platforms no longer simply distribute content but also curate and manipulate attention, turning users into both consumers and products. Drawing from scholars like Shoshana Zuboff, Jordan warns of a shift from behavioral prediction to behavioral automation, all within a largely opaque ecosystem that demands greater transparency and regulation (p. 15). In "The Time Was Right," he traces the technological and cultural conditions that enabled the rise of YouTube and TikTok. While YouTube grew from the participatory ethos of Web 2.0, TikTok emerged in a mobile-first, AI-driven environment, actively directing user activity and representing a more refined, algorithm-centric platform model. Together, these chapters show how platform logic has come to dominate media consumption, creativity, and cultural production.

In chapter 3, Jordan explores the immense challenges of moderating user-generated content on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. He argues that these companies benefit from Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which allows them to profit from content they do not create and are not obligated toe monitor (p. 54). Jordan emphasizes the sheer scale of uploads, which is over 7 million

videos daily on YouTube alone, and highlights the unrealistic burden placed on human screeners, who are often underpaid contractors exposed to disturbing content with little mental health support. At this point, it is hard to even imagine how many human screeners would be needed to moderate content if large volumes of it were artificially generated by AI. Algorithms, while useful, tend to promote sensational content for engagement and remain opaque and biased. He also raises concerns about digital literacy, misinformation, and harmful content like hate speech and child pornography. Jordan concludes that the size and speed of online video growth make effective regulation nearly impossible, with both human and algorithmic moderation falling short.

Jordan critiques YouTube's role as a learning platform in chapter 4, by referencing Benjamin Bratton's TEDx talk, which criticizes TED for oversimplifying complex ideas to fit short time slots and appeal to audiences that avoid nuance (p. 83). Bratton labels TED as "middlebrow megachurch infotainment," where speakers often blend personal stories with moments of realization, what he calls "epiphimony" (p. 83). This creates a feel-good narrative that promotes "placebo politics," offering false hope while ignoring deeper systemic issues. Jordan uses this critique to question the educational value of platforms like TED and other popular YouTube learning channels.

In chapter 5, Jordan highlights how platforms like YouTube have become central to entertainment, especially in music and sports. He explains that online video reshapes what counts as entertainment, fosters parasocial relationships, and enables direct fan-athlete interaction, while also warning of its downsides. He concludes that online video is transforming nearly all forms of leisure and communication.

In chapter 6, he talks about how technology shapes content by changing how people make, share, and watch it. In the past, artists used tools of their time, like Renaissance painters with canvases, while today, DJs and creators use digital tools to make mashups and reaction videos. Easy access to editing software and old content has fueled creative expression that often challenges copyright norms. This shift allows anyone to create and share content, giving more people a voice and reducing the influence of traditional media. And then algorithms decide what becomes popular. Ultimately, technology has changed both content and how people experience it.

Chapter 7 focuses on how online video functions in a complex, multiplatform ecosystem. Most platforms act as "walled gardens," making it difficult for outsiders to understand how users behave across services like TikTok, YouTube, or Facebook. For example, users may leave one platform for another due to policy or design changes, while creators often juggle several platforms to maintain visibility.

One key point, here, is that algorithms, not people, now determine what becomes visible, though users have the sense of invisible automatic decision-making processes that regulate platforms like TikTok (Felaco, 2025). The chapter concludes that understanding and managing online video across platforms is increasingly difficult but crucial, as global platforms shape public discourse, identity, and even real-life events.

In chapter 8, Jordan compares the rise of online video to the printing press, arguing that it is transforming communication, identity, and public discourse through new technologies, job roles (like influencers and vloggers), and user behaviors. Drawing on Chris Anderson and Elizabeth Eisenstein, he highlights how video conveys human nuance and is reshaping society at a much faster pace than print once did (p. 173). In the conclusion, Jordan marks the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point, noting YouTube's shift toward curated health content and TikTok's surge among young users. He warns that these platforms now operate beyond human understanding, driven by algorithms, and predicts tighter regulation and major changes in education. The author admits to being pessimistic about where these platforms are heading. He expects "more stunts, more misogyny, more slavish imitation, more behavioral manipulation" in the years ahead (p. 192).

One of the book's key strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach. Jordan draws from media theory, history, computer science, and cultural criticism to illustrate how platforms use algorithmic recommendation systems not just to serve content but to shape user behavior at scale. His use of scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff and Benjamin Bratton deepens the critique, offering a robust framework for understanding the shift from behavioral prediction to behavioral automation.

Another significant contribution is Jordan's historical framing, particularly his parallel between the impact of online video and the printing press. By contextualizing digital media as a civilization-altering force, Jordan elevates the conversation beyond surface-level media analysis. The book also excels in explaining how platform logic has reshaped entertainment, education, and even politics.

Equally notable is Jordan's attention to the darker sides of platform dominance, like misinformation, digital addiction, algorithmic bias, and regulatory failure. His coverage of moderation challenges for the lack of human screeners and ethical dilemmas gives the book a critical edge that enhances its relevance for policymakers, scholars, and technologists alike.

Despite its wide scope, the book lacks empirical data and relies on secondary sources and anecdotal examples, which, while illustrative, limit its value as a definitive scholarly reference. Moreover, his personal avoidance of TikTok due to privacy concerns creates a noticeable gap in firsthand platform experience, especially given the book's emphasis on user behavior and platform design.

The book also tends to focus primarily on Western perspectives, with limited engagement in non-Western digital cultures. A more comparative approach between YouTube and TikTok could have added valuable nuance, as TikTok differs significantly from YouTube and other platforms that may initially appear to offer similar services and features (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Moreover, while Jordan poses important questions early in the book about user tolerance, rebellion, and the personal costs of platform use, he does not offer clear or direct answers to them later, which may leave some readers unsatisfied.

Overall, this book is a thought-provoking and timely exploration of how algorithm-driven platforms are reshaping culture, cognition, and communication. While it has limitations in empirical rigor

and global scope, it contributes meaningfully to the growing discourse on platform studies, digital media ethics, and the algorithmic society. Jordan's call for greater accountability, transparency, and digital literacy makes this a vital read for anyone grappling with the future of online media.

References

Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2022). Why's everyone on TikTok now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-making on social media. *Social Media + Society, 8*(1), 1–11. doi:10.1177/20563051221086241

Felaco, C. (2025). Making sense of algorithm: Exploring TikTok users' awareness of content recommendation and moderation algorithms. *International Journal of Communication, 19*, 1081–1102. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/23508