

Engaging Minds¹

Time: 9.30 pm IST on Saturday 3rd February.

Topic : The Tyranny of the algorithm: Why every coffee shop looks the same

Next topic: The Tyranny of the algorithm: Why every coffee shop looks the same

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2024/jan/16/the-tyranny-of-the-algorithm-why-every-coffee-shop-looks-the-same>

The search results for hipster coffee shop the following qualities: plentiful daylight through large storefront windows; industrial-size wood tables for accessible seating; a bright interior with walls painted white or covered in subway tiles; and wifi available for writing or procrastinating. Of course, the actual coffee mattered, too, and at these cafes you could be assured of getting a cappuccino made from fashionably light-roast espresso, your choice of milk variety and elaborate latte art.

These cafes had all adopted similar aesthetics and offered similar menus, but they hadn't been forced to do so by a corporate parent, the way a chain like Starbucks replicated itself. Instead, despite their vast geographical separation and total independence from each other, the cafes had all drifted toward the same end point. The sheer expanse of sameness was too shocking and new to be boring. My theory was that all the physical places interconnected by apps had a way of resembling one another. In the case of the cafes, the growth of Instagram gave international cafe owners and baristas a way to follow one another in real time and gradually, via algorithmic recommendations, begin consuming the same kinds of content.

AirSpace was less of a specific style than a condition that we existed in, something beyond a single aesthetic trend. Like all fashions, the visual style of that moment in the mid-2010s decayed. The white subway tiles that were once cool began to look too cliched, and they were replaced by brightly coloured or more textured ceramic tiles. The financial crisis-era, rough-hewn style of high Brooklyn lumberjack, with its repurposed industrial furniture, gave way to careful, Scandinavian-ish mid-century modernism, with spindly-legged chairs and wood joinery. The elements of style turned out to be less important than the fundamental homogeneity, which became more and more entrenched. The signs changed, evolving one step at a time over the years, but the sameness stayed the same. This homogenisation is not just a phenomenon of our own moment; it is a consequence of changes that happened long before algorithmic social media feeds, and is just as likely to intensify in the future. After all, each time a grand flattening is announced the world somehow finds a way to get even flatter.

Simply existing as a coffee shop isn't enough; the business has to cultivate a parallel existence on the internet, which is a separate skill set entirely. "It almost feels like, you must have a social

¹ Season 1 Episode 5: Topic: The Tyranny of the Algorithm: Why every coffee shop looks the same

media acumen, you must be savvy in this area that is adjacent to your business, but not directly embedded in your business, in order to be successful and visible,” Walsh continued. That means plenty of tagged photos on Instagram and positive user reviews on the business’s listing on Yelp or Google Maps.

In a way, coffee shops are physical filtering algorithms, too: they sort people based on their preferences, quietly attracting a particular crowd and repelling others by their design and menu choices. That kind of community formation might be more important in the long run than attaining perfect latte art and collecting Instagram followers. That is ultimately what Anca Ungureanu was trying to do in Bucharest. “We are a coffee shop where you can meet people like you, people that have interests like you,” she said. Her comment made me think that a certain amount of homogeneity might be an unavoidable consequence of algorithmic globalisation, simply because so many like-minded people are now moving through the same physical spaces, influenced by the same digital platforms. The sameness has a way of compounding.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-sQSp5jbSQ>

How different is this from the song little boxes first sung by Pete Seeger in 1963 written by Malveena Reynolds in 1962.

Next topic: Young Generations Are Now Poorer Than Their Parents And It's Changing Our Economies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=PkJITKUaF3Q>

Date: 10th March 2024

Time: 9.30 pm IST

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