

ALGORITHMIC VISIBILITY AND CULTURAL POWER: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION ON THAI DIGITAL MEDIA*

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Abstract

This academic article examines how algorithmic visibility reshapes cultural power in Thai digital media under conditions of platformization. Rather than treating algorithms as neutral mechanisms of content distribution, the article conceptualizes algorithmic systems as cultural infrastructures that actively structure what becomes visible, recognizable, and culturally dominant. Drawing on theories of platform governance, algorithmic power, and communication art (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Couldry & Hepp, 2017), the article develops a theoretical framework to analyze how Thai cultural expression is selectively amplified, reorganized, and hierarchized in digital environments. It argues that cultural power in platformized media is increasingly determined by visibility regimes shaped through algorithmic filtering, repetition, and engagement optimization. Thai digital media thus becomes a site where cultural identity is not only expressed but also algorithmically negotiated. By reframing visibility as a form of power, this article

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contributes to communication art scholarship and advances theoretical understanding of digital culture beyond representational paradigms.

Keyword: Algorithmic Visibility, Cultural Power, Thai Digital Media, Platformization, Communication Art

Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the conditions under which culture is produced, circulated, and experienced. Central to this transformation is the increasing role of algorithmic systems in organizing visibility. What audiences encounter in digital environments is no longer structured primarily by editorial selection or chronological order, but by algorithmic recommendation driven by engagement metrics and data-driven prediction (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018).

Algorithmic visibility does not merely determine access to content; it reshapes cultural hierarchies by privileging certain forms of expression over others. Visibility becomes a form of power through which cultural meanings are amplified, normalized, or marginalized. In this sense, digital platforms operate not only as technological infrastructures but also as cultural systems that structure symbolic dominance (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Thailand provides a particularly compelling context for examining these dynamics. As a rapidly digitizing society with strong cultural identity and active participation in short-video platforms, Thai digital media reflects the intersection between local cultural sensibilities and global platform logics. Cultural expression in Thailand is increasingly mediated through algorithmically curated environments, raising questions about how cultural power is redistributed under conditions of platformization.

This article develops a theoretical reflection on algorithmic visibility and cultural power in Thai digital media. Rather than focusing on empirical measurement, it adopts a conceptual approach grounded in communication art

theory and platform studies. It argues that algorithmic visibility functions as a key mechanism through which cultural expression is reorganized, producing new hierarchies of representation, affect, and recognition.

Recent studies on Thai digital media have demonstrated the increasing influence of platform-based communication on cultural production, online participation, and identity construction. Research conducted by Thai scholars indicates that platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have become important spaces where cultural trends, local traditions, and youth identities are negotiated and reconstructed. The rapid expansion of short-video platforms in Thailand has also intensified competition for visibility, making algorithmic recommendation systems a key determinant of cultural exposure. These developments suggest that algorithmic visibility is not merely a technical issue but a cultural mechanism shaping contemporary Thai digital experiences.

Objectives

1. it aims to conceptualize algorithmic visibility as a form of cultural power within platformized media environments, moving beyond its conventional understanding as mere exposure or distribution
2. it seeks to examine how algorithmic systems structure the selective amplification, filtering, and normalization of cultural expression in Thai digital media.
3. it aims to analyze how these processes produce new hierarchies of cultural recognition and representation under conditions of platform governance.

Literature Review

Algorithmic visibility refers to the way digital platforms decide which people, issues, images, videos, and cultural meanings become visible, popular, searchable, or invisible. In digital media studies, algorithms are not neutral technical tools; they are systems of classification, ranking, recommendation, and moderation that shape public attention (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). In Thailand, this issue is significant because digital platforms are deeply embedded in everyday communication, politics, commerce, entertainment, and cultural identity. Thailand had 51.0 million active social media user identities in January 2025, equal to 71.1% of the population, showing that platform visibility has become a major condition of social and cultural participation.

The concept of algorithmic power is closely related to cultural power. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) argue that platform societies are shaped by datafication, commodification, and selection. These mechanisms transform culture into measurable engagement, such as likes, shares, watch time, comments, and trends. As a result, cultural value is increasingly judged by platform metrics rather than only by traditional institutions such as schools, temples, state agencies, newspapers, or universities. In Thai digital media, cultural visibility often depends on whether content fits the emotional and commercial logic of platforms: short videos, dramatic narratives, political controversy, celebrity culture, beauty, lifestyle, religion, and nationalism can become highly visible when they generate engagement.

Gillespie (2014) explains that algorithms act as “public relevance” machines because they organize what users see and what they believe to be important. This is important for Thailand because digital media is not only a communication channel but also a space of political expression and social negotiation. Studies on Thai youth and digital politics show that social media supports mobilization, communication, and activism, especially among younger

citizens. However, algorithmic visibility can also amplify polarization, misinformation, online harassment, and symbolic conflict. Thus, digital visibility is not merely technological; it is political and cultural.

From a cultural studies perspective, power works through representation, discourse, and normalization (Hall, 1997). Algorithms participate in this process by repeatedly promoting certain images of “Thainess,” morality, beauty, success, religion, gender, class, and political legitimacy. Content that aligns with dominant platform aesthetics or popular affect may gain visibility, while minority voices, slow academic knowledge, local community narratives, or critical political discourse may remain less visible. This reflects Bourdieu’s (1991) idea of symbolic power: power operates when certain meanings are recognized as legitimate while others are marginalized.

Thai digital media also shows a tension between democratization and control. On one hand, platforms allow ordinary users, youth movements, small entrepreneurs, monks, activists, influencers, and local communities to produce content without depending fully on traditional media institutions. On the other hand, visibility is still governed by opaque platform rules, commercial advertising systems, state regulation, and audience behavior. Recent research on Southeast Asian social media politics notes that platforms can support grassroots activism while also enabling algorithmic political practices and forms of control.

The Thai case is especially important because digital platforms intersect with monarchy, religion, nationalism, generational conflict, and state authority. The rise of platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, X, and LINE has created new arenas where cultural legitimacy is contested. For example, political satire, youth activism, religious communication, celebrity fandom, and local business promotion all depend on algorithmic circulation. The Reuters report on Clubhouse and Thai dissident discussion illustrates how platform

visibility can rapidly create new political publics while also attracting state concern.

Algorithmic visibility also affects the Thai creative economy. Thai entertainment, influencers, and digital fandoms increasingly gain regional and global visibility through platform circulation. International attention to Thai entertainment and influencer culture shows that algorithmic virality can convert local cultural production into global cultural capital. Yet this visibility is uneven: creators who understand platform trends, aesthetics, timing, hashtags, and fan engagement are more likely to succeed than those without digital literacy or production resources.

In conclusion, algorithmic visibility in Thai digital media should be understood as a form of cultural power. Algorithms shape not only what people see but also what society recognizes, values, debates, and remembers. In Thailand, this power operates through the interaction of platform capitalism, political regulation, cultural identity, user participation, and digital affect. A theoretical reflection on Thai digital media therefore requires moving beyond the idea of algorithms as technical systems and examining them as cultural institutions that structure visibility, legitimacy, and symbolic authority.

Methodology

This article adopts a theoretical-conceptual methodology grounded in interpretive communication research. The study does not seek to generate empirical findings but rather to synthesize and critically examine existing theoretical perspectives on algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and cultural power.

The theoretical sources included in this study were selected according to three criteria:

- 1.Relevance to algorithmic governance and digital platforms;

2. Contribution to theories of cultural power and media visibility;

3. Influence within communication and media studies.

The analytical process involved reviewing foundational and contemporary literature, identifying recurring conceptual themes, and integrating these concepts into a coherent framework for understanding Thai digital media.

Through conceptual synthesis and theoretical interpretation, the article develops a framework that explains how algorithmic systems shape cultural visibility and symbolic power under conditions of platformization.

Results

Algorithmic Visibility and Cultural Power

1. Visibility as Cultural Power

Visibility has long been central to cultural power. In mediated environments, what is seen and circulated gains legitimacy and symbolic authority, while what remains invisible is often excluded from cultural recognition (Hall, 1997). In digital platforms, this dynamic is intensified through algorithmic systems that determine exposure at scale.

Algorithmic visibility transforms visibility from a passive condition into an active process of selection and prioritization. Content is ranked, filtered, and recommended based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and watch time. These mechanisms create hierarchies of attention in which certain cultural expressions gain prominence while others are systematically marginalized (Bucher, 2018).

From this perspective, cultural power in digital media is increasingly tied to the capacity to achieve visibility within algorithmic systems. Visibility becomes a form of symbolic capital shaped not only by cultural meaning but also by platform logics.

For example, Thai TikTok creators frequently adapt local cultural performances, food culture, and lifestyle content into short-form videos optimized for algorithmic recommendation. Such content often achieves widespread visibility due to its compatibility with platform engagement metrics.

2. Platformization and Cultural Hierarchy

Platformization refers to the increasing role of digital platforms in structuring social and cultural processes (van Dijck et al., 2018). Within this framework, cultural production is shaped by platform infrastructures that prioritize scalability, engagement, and data extraction.

These infrastructures generate new forms of cultural hierarchy. Rather than traditional distinctions based on institutional authority, visibility hierarchies emerge through algorithmic circulation. Content that aligns with platform logics—such as immediacy, emotional intensity, and repetition—is more likely to be amplified.

In Thai digital media, this results in selective visibility of certain aesthetic and cultural forms. Expressive styles that are visually striking, emotionally engaging, and easily repeatable tend to dominate platform circulation. As a result, cultural representation is not evenly distributed but structured through algorithmic preference.

3. Algorithmic Governance and Cultural Filtering

Algorithms function as mechanisms of governance that regulate cultural visibility (Gillespie, 2014). Through processes of filtering and recommendation, they shape what users encounter and how cultural meaning is constructed.

Algorithmic governance operates through opacity and automation. Users often remain unaware of how visibility is determined, while creators adapt their content to align with perceived algorithmic preferences. This creates a feedback loop in which cultural production becomes increasingly oriented toward visibility optimization.

Recent scholarship highlights how algorithmic systems embed biases and reinforce dominant patterns of expression (Kitchin, 2017; Beer, 2017). In the Thai context, this suggests that cultural visibility is not neutral but structured through technological and economic priorities that shape the circulation of meaning.

Thai Digital Media as a Site of Cultural Negotiation

1. Cultural Expression under Algorithmic Conditions

Thai digital media reflects a dynamic interaction between local cultural sensibilities and global platform logics. Cultural expression is increasingly shaped by the need to achieve visibility within algorithmic environments.

Rather than simply expressing pre-existing cultural forms, creators actively negotiate how cultural elements are presented. Visual styles, narrative pacing, and affective cues are adapted to align with platform expectations. This process does not eliminate cultural specificity but reorganizes it within new conditions of visibility.

During major cultural festivals such as Songkran and Loy Krathong, algorithmic systems often amplify visually appealing and emotionally engaging content, contributing to the wider circulation of specific representations of Thai culture.

2. Selective Amplification and Cultural Representation

Algorithmic systems amplify certain cultural expressions while limiting others. In Thai digital media, this often results in the prominence of highly stylized, emotionally engaging, and visually condensed forms of content.

Selective amplification produces a form of cultural filtering in which only certain aspects of cultural identity become widely visible. Everyday practices, slower aesthetic forms, or less visually dynamic expressions may remain underrepresented despite their cultural significance.

This dynamic highlights the uneven distribution of cultural visibility and the role of algorithms in shaping collective perception.

Popular Thai influencers and lifestyle creators often receive greater algorithmic exposure than creators producing niche cultural or educational content, illustrating how visibility hierarchies emerge within platform environments.

3. Repetition, Recognition, and Cultural Normalization

Repetition plays a crucial role in algorithmic visibility. Content that is repeated and replicated becomes more recognizable and more likely to be circulated. This process contributes to the normalization of specific cultural forms.

In Thai digital media, repetitive visual motifs, gestures, and narrative structures contribute to the formation of recognizable cultural patterns. These patterns gain visibility not necessarily because they are more authentic, but because they align with algorithmic logic.

As repetition reinforces visibility, it also stabilizes certain representations as dominant cultural forms, shaping how Thai identity is perceived both locally and globally.

Communication Art Perspective on Algorithmic Visibility

Communication art theory emphasizes the experiential dimension of media. Meaning is not only transmitted but also shaped through form, rhythm, and affect (Dewey, 2005; Silverstone, 1999).

From this perspective, algorithmic visibility is not merely a technical process but an aesthetic condition. The organization of visibility influences how cultural meaning is experienced. Content that is visually immediate, emotionally engaging, and rhythmically structured is more likely to resonate within platform environments.

Algorithmic systems thus shape not only what is seen but also how it is felt. Cultural power operates through affective experience as much as through symbolic representation.

This insight expands the analysis of algorithmic power by integrating aesthetic and experiential dimensions into discussions of digital media.

Discussion

The analysis presented in this article challenges the assumption that digital platforms democratize cultural expression. While platforms enable broader participation, they also introduce new forms of control through algorithmic visibility.

Cultural power in digital media is increasingly structured through visibility regimes that privilege certain forms of expression. These regimes are shaped by platform design, economic incentives, and algorithmic logic.

In the Thai context, this results in a complex interplay between cultural continuity and transformation. Cultural identity is not simply preserved or lost but negotiated within conditions of selective visibility and algorithmic filtering. Understanding digital culture therefore requires a shift from representation to visibility, and from content to infrastructure. Power operates not only through what is said, but through what is seen.

Although algorithmic systems may reinforce dominant forms of visibility, they can also create opportunities for cultural participation and creative expression. Digital platforms enable independent creators, local communities, and marginalized voices to reach wider audiences without relying on traditional media institutions. In the Thai context, algorithmic recommendation systems have contributed to the dissemination of local cultural practices and grassroots

creativity. Therefore, algorithmic visibility should be understood as both a mechanism of control and a potential resource for cultural empowerment.

Conclusion

This article has argued that algorithmic visibility functions as a central mechanism of cultural power in Thai digital media. By conceptualizing platforms as infrastructures of visibility, it demonstrates how cultural expression is selectively amplified and hierarchized.

The theoretical framework developed here contributes to communication art and platform studies by emphasizing the role of visibility in shaping cultural meaning. Future research may explore how audiences engage with algorithmically curated content or how creators strategically navigate visibility regimes.

Ultimately, digital culture is not only a space of expression but also a field of power structured through algorithmic visibility.

The framework developed in this article has several practical implications. For media researchers, it provides a conceptual lens for examining visibility inequalities in platform environments. For policymakers, it highlights the need for greater transparency and accountability in algorithmic recommendation systems. For digital content creators, it offers insight into how platform logics influence cultural visibility and audience engagement.

Recommendation

Based on the theoretical analysis presented in this study, several recommendations can be proposed.

First, researchers should further investigate algorithmic visibility through empirical studies that examine how recommendation systems influence cultural participation, content circulation, and audience engagement in Thai digital media environments.

Second, policymakers and regulatory bodies should promote greater transparency and accountability regarding algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. Improved transparency may help reduce inequalities in visibility and support a more diverse digital cultural ecosystem.

Third, digital content creators should develop a critical understanding of platform algorithms while maintaining cultural authenticity. Rather than solely optimizing content for engagement metrics, creators should seek balanced strategies that preserve cultural diversity and meaningful representation.

Finally, future research should explore comparative perspectives by examining how algorithmic visibility shapes cultural power across different Southeast Asian countries. Such studies may provide broader insights into the relationship between platform governance, digital culture, and regional cultural transformation.

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