Why am I seeing this? Assessing Twitter users’ knowledge of curation algorithm behavior

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On social media platforms, social interactions are influenced by an often imperceptible third-party: curation algorithms. Curation algorithms select the social content with which users interact and form impressions of others — but are users aware of this influence? Here, we investigate Twitter users’ (N = 68) awareness of how Twitter’s curation algorithm directs what Tweets they see using an assessment developed based on Twitter’s public documentation. On average, users scored low on our assessment (M = 58% correct answers, SD = 16%, range = 13%–86%) but reported moderate-to-high confidence in their answers (on a scale from 1-100: M = 71, SD = 13, 43-99). We find no correlation between assessment accuracy and confidence, r(66) = −0.19, p = 0.13, and strikingly, no correlation between assessment accuracy and daily frequency of Twitter use, r(66) = −0.02, p = 0.90, suggesting that neither people’s confidence nor time spent on the platform track how well they understand the social influence of curation algorithms. Furthermore, we find an illusion of explanatory depth with respect to curation algorithm awareness: prior to the assessment, users reported moderate-to-high levels of understanding of curation algorithms, but self-reported understanding was significantly reduced after the assessment, t(66) = 6.76, p < .001. These results suggest that users generally have a poor understanding of how curation algorithms shape their social experiences on social media platforms, and lack awareness of their ignorance — but also assessments probing knowledge of algorithms may be sufficient to raise awareness of this gap in understanding.