

# Ethical Obligations to Provide Novelty

Paige Golden

University of Pennsylvania  
paigegol@sas.upenn.edu

David Danks

Carnegie Mellon University  
ddanks@cmu.edu

## Background & Core Question

- TikTok is a newer content platform for “light” content
- For You feed provides customized content for users
- Empirically, For You feed seems to provide a relatively homogeneous stream of recommendations
- And TikTok has received significant negative press coverage as a result
- ‘Novelty bias’: Deliberately showing novel or different content
- ⇒ Content that is *not* predicted to be as highly enjoyed/liked as other
- **Is TikTok ethically obligated to include a novelty bias?**

## Open Empirical Questions

- What value (if any) do *users* gain from novelty in their feed?
- What value (if any) do *creators* gain from novelty in others’ feeds?
- Answers currently unknown...

## Values & Interests Impacted by Novelty Bias

### *Users*

- Intrinsic value of novelty
- Intrinsic cost of content that is less likely to be enjoyed
- Instrumental value of exposure to new ideas, lifestyles, cultures, interests, opportunities, ...

### *Creators*

- Intrinsic value of creation, including enjoyment by others
- Intrinsic cost of losing (partial) access to preferred/target audience
- Instrumental value of fame, attention, and increased revenue

### *TikTok*

- Value of adding and keeping both users and creators
- Value of increased user and creator engagement with the platform
- Cost of negative publicity

## Integrated Recommendation

- Empirical impact on creators largely depends on empirical impact on users
- We assume: TikTok users & creators are free to opt-out, so TikTok has no special moral obligations to them
- However: TikTok’s *own* interests imply that they should care about the values and interests of users and creators
- *Conclusion*: “TikTok ethically ought to include an algorithmic novelty bias if and only if users and creators gain value from a novelty bias.”
- *One exception*: If bad PR has a much bigger impact than user engagement

## Next Steps

- Answering the empirical questions
- Is there a meaningful difference between novelty & diversity in the context of TikTok?
- Translation to practice...