

The loop of loops

The Recursive Dynamics of Videos on Social Media

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Introduction

After the global, outstanding success of the Chinese-owned TikTok in 2020, most social media platforms have adopted the short video format as their preferred way of engaging users and generating content, such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts and Facebook Watch. These videos are typically proposed to the user in dedicated sections of the platform, in the form of an endless flow of videos, categorised and distributed according to algorithmically calculated user preferences. The emergence of short videos marks a significant novelty compared to previously phases in social media led by image or textual content. Indeed, the new peculiar functioning of TikTok, based on memetic forms of imitation and replication rapidly adopted by other platforms, has been compared to the 'end of the social networks' as we knew them from the beginning of their story (*The Economist*, 2024).

This brief piece critically discusses the algorithmically prompted recursive mechanism that underpins the ways in which social media platforms distribute visual content, and specifically short videos, to users. We conceptualise this dynamics as a 'loop of loops', where the first order of loops is constituted by the self-repeating cycle of each video, embedded in the non-stop flux of (apparently) new content that is continuously proposed to the user in a platform, and the second order of loops is represented by the connection among the various platform-specific feedback loops created among social media platforms through processes of content iteration, translation or reappropriation (Beer, 2019; Loosen *et al.*, 2016). We illustrate this mechanism with vignettes taken from two platforms, TikTok and IG (reels), highlighting some of its issues. Challenging the mainstream metaphor of the 'stream', employed by predominant technological imaginaries ever since the launch and diffusion of Web 2.0, we argue that the 'loop of loops' looks more like a clogged pool, where the movement, only apparent, takes the form of an eternal return of the same contents, actors and themes. As such, the 'loop of loops', despite constituting the infrastructural mechanism governing current social media functioning, is already displaying failures, discontent and practices of resistance, cracking open possible ways out from it.

The loop of loops as the digital logic of 'too-late Capitalism'

Recognising that social networks are but one of the purest forms of expression of platform capitalism, the loop of loops must be contextualised in what Kornbluh (2024) has recently defined the 'style of Too-Late Capitalism': immediacy. Marx famously insisted that capital is not a 'thing', but a process of circulation, which is necessarily limitless (Marx, 1939/1993). For Kornbluh, in the era of 'too-late capitalism' this process becomes sclerotic, due to the overarching principle of immediacy, defined as a "deluge without staunch" and "a stylized flood of intense immanence in cultural aesthetics that eerily

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conforms to contemporary conditions of oil swells and aquatic surges" (Kornbluhh 2024, p. 24). At a systemic level, the loop of loops requires to keep the (over)flow of videos and content infinitely constant in order to properly work. At the practical level, this translates into shaping both creators' and consumers' actions towards the accomplishment of this imperative. Legitimate creators are pushed to publish countless copy-cat videos designed after the latest successful template or trend (more on this below). The same logic also fosters a digital underworld of myriads of accounts, publishing film and tv series short clips (flipped or speeded up to bypass legal issues), pirated content from famous creators, or AI-generated videos. These accounts are, from a formal platform's viewpoint, infiltrators, exploiting the system and damaging the realisation of a quality digital environment with an authentic vibe. However, once the loop of loops' is contextualised in the style of too-late capitalism, they emerge as functional to the system: the loop of loops could not maintain its perpetual overflow without them. Symmetrically, this contextualisation reveals how the compulsive, quick-paced, potentially infinite doom scrolling (Rixen *et al.*, 2023), taking a heavy toll on users' wellbeing, is not a degeneration but a necessary and functional feature of the loop of loops in the consumption sphere.

TikTok is able to perfectly incarnate the logic outlined above, thanks to an aggressive and hyper-sensitive algorithm, which reduces humans to a mere series of feedbacks. As known, from the very first login the user is presented with an infinite sequence of self-repeating videos, that will be more and more refined by the algorithm, tailoring them to the users' preferences. While the exact functioning of the algorithmic elaborations remains largely unknown, each action undertaken by users (from skipping/lingering on the video to engaging with it through comments/likes) contributes to shaping their loop of loops. We can say that, for TikTok, the loop of loops represents a fundamental part of the platform infrastructure, as it is the main mechanism through which content is presented to the user. In other cases, like IG reels, the looping mechanism is actualised in a specific section of the platform, which has become equally central for it.

The same logic permeates the practices of content creation in the loop of loops on TikTok (Zulli and Zulli, 2020) and Instagram (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021). Creators (and users in general) in the loop of loops are forced to follow a specific memetic logic and grammar, made by specific compositional and visual rules. They creatively interact and remix existing videos, through ad-hoc affordances, like the stitch or the duet¹. The possibility to reuse sounds, stickers, and filters goes in the same direction, favouring the emergence of new, platform specific, *imitation publics* (Zulli and Zulli, 2020) aimed at acquiring more visibility. The content proposed within the looping dynamics of the algorithmic elaboration is, in fact, only apparently new: the recommender system ultimately settles down on a reduced selection of themes that, according to its calculation, may interest the user. It is the contradiction of a mechanism that, in theory, pours onto the user a seemingly infinite string of contents, but that practically circles back to the same (algorithmically calculated) topics, the same authors and, ultimately, the same videos. A fundamental implication of this new logic and grammar is that, in the loop of loops, both creators and the objects of their creation become ephemeral and fundamentally irrelevant: the (value of) circulation is everything, and the (value of) content becomes nothing.

In this section, we have progressively displayed how the loop of loops becomes the logistic model governing content circulation on social media in the sclerotic phase of late modern capitalism. The focus on loops, in the plural, highlights how – despite each social network designs itself as a digital enclosure in which the user is to be trapped through a range of peculiar features – the ever-increasing overflow of content circulation happens interconnectedly *between* different platforms. The loop of loops is constantly expanding, bending new platforms to its logic: initially a TikTok feature, it has then

1 A *stitch* is a function allowing the incorporation of a snippet of another user's video into your own. A *duet* enables the user to create a video with another one side-by-side on the screen.

been adopted by Instagram and Facebook as 'Reels', by Youtube as 'Shorts', by Netflix as 'Fast Laughs' (now discontinued) to become even recently tested by LinkedIn, a platform that, by design, could have been deemed immune to such processes. The contents transpire from platform to platform, being re-proposed through endless dialectic cycles of memetic imitation and replication based on the specific affordances of the platform. Contextualised in the historical developments of social networks, the loop of the loops can be interpreted as the latest instance in the broader tendency of social networks to rapidly converge towards the imitation and incorporation of the latest promising feature from competitors, in the hope of enlarging or at least retaining its audience. Thus, its 'irresistible' expansion is not necessarily proof of its efficiency or inevitability, and, at a closer inspection, reveals multiple jammings and leakages.

Jammings in the mechanisms: malfunctions and subversive practises in the loop of loops

The era marked by the emergence of Web 2.0 was welcomed with an optimistic feeling, associated with the evocative image of being in a 'flow' or a 'stream' of information. The new landscape defined by networked media implies, as argued by boyd, that users are immersed in the 'stream' of content but also that they have a certain agency and control over its course, by "adding to it, consuming it, redirecting it" (boyd, 2010). The image of the loop of loops challenges the metaphor of the stream, revealing that the user is neither floating over a flux of information, nor able to fully control its direction. The information overload, typical of intrusive media infrastructures, answers the insatiable need for large quantities of user data to satisfy the capitalistic economic interests of tech companies (Mollen and Dhaenens, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, during which the entirety of our social and working life was transferred online, has only worsened an already far-from-ideal situation: bombarded by content that demands our constant attention, an increasing number of users started suffering from cognitive fatigue and feeling the urge to opt out from digital media through practices of 'digital disconnection' and 'digital detox' (Moe and Madsen, 2021).

In the loop of loops, this overload of information is designed to entrap users like a whirlpool, dragging them into circles that lead them nowhere. The system is designed for the users to have little or no agency to interrupt, even partially, the looping mechanism: on Instagram, the user cannot pause the reproduction of the videos but only mute the audio; on TikTok, this functionality was introduced only recently, followed by the possibility to speed up or even jump to a specific moment of the video. At the same time, as anticipated in the previous section, the systemic properties of the loop of loops favour the progressive jamming of the system due to the proliferation of semi-legal spam videos, in the n^{th} instance of 'enshittification' (Doctorow, 2023) of digital services. If immediacy as style is the necessary contextualisation to understand the loop of loops, the inherent cannibalistic property of capitalism (Fraser, 2022) is a more appropriate logic to understand its jamming. The loop of loops exacts a heavy toll in terms of negative externalities: both the energy required to keep the circulation ongoing, and the psychological strain it imposes on creators and consumers. Yet, it inherently holds the seeds of its own disruption, like digital limescale.

The consequences of this cannibalistic process are evident in many observable micro-instances of subversion enacted by users in their everyday engagement with the loop of loops, which produce leakages in the mechanism. Here we focus on two relevant cases: *ReesaTeesa* and *Accorciabro*. In February 2024, user *ReesaTeesa*, a woman from the US, published a series of videos entitled 'Who TF did I marry?', sharing personal details of her 6-month marriage to a man, who turned out to be a pathological liar. The series is composed of circa 50 TikToks, each lasting around 10 minutes (the maximum time allowed by TikTok), for a total of more than eight hours. The series was an outstanding success, with each 'episode' (practically a mini-podcast form) totalling millions of views. While

it is impossible to know if behind these ‘longform TikToks’ there was a deliberate attempt to subvert the platform’s logic or not, this example is emblematic of a wider number of creative ‘practices from below’ challenging immediacy, rapid-fire sequence of videos and attempting to return to longer formats. The second example goes in the opposite direction. The Italian creator *Accorciabro* publishes a format of videos, which summarise in a few seconds the videos of other creators. Apparently, *Accorciabro* does the exact opposite of *ReesaTeesa*: it further speeds up the process of video consumption. However, *Accorciabro*’s success ultimately depends on breaking the doom scrolling loop trapping the user, while contemporarily mocking the vacuity of the contents, giving an ideal – if simplistic – exit route from the whirlpool.

Taken together, these two cases demonstrate how the loop of loops not only contains in itself the source of its jamming; its enschittification grows discontent among end users and influencers alike, which in turn fosters the success of subverting practices from below. These practices, to recall De Certeau’s (1988) vocabulary, resemble tactics more than strategies: they produce ephemeral forms of resistance against the flow. They do not possess the power to escape from the affordances of the platform, but they play with them in unintended ways, to stray away from imposed paths. At the same time, these emerging sets of tactics should not be idealised. In the vast majority of cases, they do not seem to prefigure – at least for now – the development of widespread political activism or consciousness about these topics, remaining confined to the level of spontaneous subversive uses. Secondarily, the ephemeral nature of these practices makes them unstable over time: for example, after gaining a massive following audience on TikTok due to the aforementioned use of ‘longform TikToks’, *ReesaTeesa* has moved back to platform’s standards, frequently publishing short videos.

In conclusion, in this article we have introduced the concept of loop of loops to define the mechanism regulating video and image based social media platforms. Future research on the topic could further explore this phenomenon to offer a systematic illustration of the various aspects of loops, including platform-specific variants and subversive practices. Despite the conciseness of our piece, we believe that this concept provides a useful heuristic capable of illuminating how these patterns of content production/consumption impact our everyday online interactions, producing specific social formations and affecting our (digitally mediated) perception of the world.

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