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Perspectives & Commentaries

The Cultural Cost of Convenience: What Digital Platforms Change Beyond Technology

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Abstract

Digital platforms increasingly present convenience as a universal design ideal: fewer steps, faster decisions, and less effort between intention and action. This commentary asks what happens to cultural agency when the reduction of friction becomes a dominant principle of platform design. Drawing on platform studies, cultural sociology, science and technology studies, and research on recommender systems, it argues that platforms do more than lower transaction costs. They reorganize cultural mediation by ranking, personalizing, and automating the paths through which people encounter cultural goods. This reorganization can expand access and reduce genuinely exclusionary barriers, yet it can also displace activities through which people learn to explore, compare, interpret, and revise their judgments. To clarify this tension, the commentary distinguishes between meaningless friction, which adds administrative or mechanical burden without substantive value, and productive friction, which can sustain attention, discovery, reflection, and autonomy. The distinction is not an argument for inconvenience or against recommendation. It is a proposal to evaluate convenience by asking which human capacities a design removes, supports, or redistributes. The commentary concludes with principles for agency-preserving platforms, including controllable personalization, exploratory modes, meaningful stopping points, and evaluation criteria that extend beyond immediate relevance and ease.

Keywords: Platformization; digital culture; cultural agency; recommendation systems; productive friction; algorithmic mediation

1. The Promise of Frictionlessness

The appeal of digital platforms is often described in the language of removal. A map removes the need to carry a street atlas; a streaming service removes the trip to a video store; a recommendation feed reduces the work of searching an enormous catalogue. Lowering the time, cost, and technical skill required to reach information, entertainment, markets, or public services can widen participation, particularly for people facing mobility, linguistic, economic, or sensory barriers. Convenience is therefore a real social achievement, not merely a commercial slogan.

The difficulty begins when the removal of friction is treated as an unqualified measure of progress. Cultural activities are not only routes to an outcome; they are occasions for developing attention, preference, interpretation, and judgment. A platform that makes a choice faster may replace a person's search through heterogeneous possibilities with a ranked sequence shaped by data, prediction, and platform objectives. The experience may feel effortless while changing the conditions under which cultural agency is exercised.

This commentary addresses the question: What happens to cultural agency when the reduction of friction becomes a dominant principle of digital platform design? Its central claim is deliberately qualified. Convenience is valuable when it removes meaningless friction, such as repetitive administration or inaccessible interfaces. It becomes culturally consequential when it also removes productive friction: the encounters with uncertainty, difference, comparison, and sustained attention through which people form and test judgments. Not all friction has the same cultural value. The relevant question is not whether a platform is easy to use, but what kind of human activity its ease displaces.

2. Platforms Do Not Merely Connect; They Organize

Platforms are often represented as neutral spaces that connect users to content, sellers, creators, or one another. Platform studies has

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shown why this description is insufficient. Platformization involves the extension of platform infrastructures into other areas of social life and the conversion of external activities into data that can be processed within platform systems (Helmond, 2015). It is also an institutional process involving changes in markets, governance, and infrastructures, together with the reorganization of cultural practices around platforms (Poell et al., 2019).

In cultural production, these changes affect how works are distributed, made visible, valued, and revised. Cultural commodities become increasingly contingent on platform infrastructures, datafied feedback, and shifting forms of curation and governance (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The platform is not simply a conduit between a person and a cultural object. It is an arrangement of categories, rankings, interfaces, defaults, and feedback loops whose convenience depends on organizing the field before the user enters it.

The concept of the platform society is useful because it places technical systems within struggles over public values and collective responsibility (van Dijck et al., 2018). A frictionless interface is a small but consequential expression of these arrangements. When a service predicts a destination, queues a song, or proposes the next video, it does not only save effort; it determines which forms of mediation remain visible. Mediation has always existed through critics, teachers, librarians, friends, editors, and retailers. The question is who or what organizes it, according to which signals, and with what opportunities for contestation.

3. Infinite Choice and Algorithmic Selection

Digital platforms expand the theoretical range of available cultural objects while narrowing the practical range that any person can inspect. A catalogue may contain millions of songs or films, but a user has limited time, attention, and knowledge. Recommender systems respond by selecting and ordering what appears worth noticing. They convert abundance into a navigable sequence.

This conversion is useful, but it is not equivalent to preserving choice. A ranked list is already an interpretation of the catalogue. It privileges signals such as previous behavior, similarity, popularity, or inferred mood, while leaving other routes to discovery less prominent. Research on Netflix has shown how recommender systems embed assumptions about taste in socio-technical and computational processes rather than merely reflecting pre-existing preferences (Gaw, 2022; Pajkovic, 2022). The system does not simply find what the user likes; it participates in defining what liking can look like within the platform.

This does not justify the strongest versions of the filter-bubble thesis. Users move across platforms, draw on friends and institutions, search deliberately, and sometimes reject personalized suggestions. Algorithmic influence is neither total nor uniform. Yet the absence of total control does not make mediation irrelevant. Recommendation can make some cultural paths easy to follow and others costly to locate. In music, for example, platform circulation may reproduce existing genre boundaries through the interaction of user practices and automated relations, even where access to the catalogue is technically broad (Airoldi, 2021). The issue is not that algorithms always reduce diversity. It is that their selection criteria become part of the cultural environment in which diversity is experienced.

4. Discovery, Preference, and Delegated Judgment

Search and browsing involve different forms of cultural activity. Search is often directed toward an object already partly known: a title, artist, destination, or answer. Browsing is more open-ended, allowing a person to encounter something not specified in advance and develop a reason for attending to it. Recommendation systems can support this discovery when a user lacks the time or vocabulary to navigate a large cultural field. Their value should not be dismissed because their outputs are algorithmic.

The difficulty is that recommendation can gradually turn a history of response into a model of identity. A user is addressed through a profile assembled from clicks, skips, purchases, viewing time, and inferred affinities. As Airoldi and Rokka (2022) argue, algorithmic mediation of consumption is marked by opacity, authority, non-neutrality, and recursivity. The system learns from behavior while its own outputs help shape the behavior from which it learns. Preference is therefore not merely expressed; it is continuously returned to the user as an environment of likely choices.

This process can produce a negotiated rather than passive relation to the algorithm. Users develop practical theories about why items appear and may distance themselves from the identity the system assigns them. Gandini et al. (2023) describe this reflexive distancing as an "algorithmic other," through which people preserve a sense of agency in relation to personalized circulation. Such resistance matters, but it also reveals a burden: to contest a recommendation, users must notice the mediation, understand that an alternative is possible, and invest effort in finding it. Convenience can make judgment less visible precisely when it becomes more consequential.

5. Meaningless Friction and Productive Friction

The key distinction of this commentary is between meaningless friction and productive friction. Meaningless friction is an obstacle that adds effort without supporting a substantive human capacity. Repetitive form filling, inaccessible menus, unnecessary waiting, incompatible interfaces, and mechanical duplication are familiar examples. Reducing these burdens can increase dignity, access, and control. In such cases, convenience is not cultural impoverishment; it is the removal of an avoidable cost.

Productive friction is different. It is the effort involved in comparing unlike possibilities, staying with unfamiliar material, learning a context, tolerating uncertainty, reconsidering an initial reaction, or revising a judgment after encountering an argument. These activities can be uncomfortable and slow when measured against immediate satisfaction, but they are part of how cultural competence and autonomy develop. A reader who follows references beyond the first result, a listener who explores an unfamiliar genre, or a viewer who pauses to interpret is not merely paying a cost. Each is practicing a way of making meaning.

Productive friction should not be romanticized. Difficulty can exclude, exhaust, and reproduce inequality. A confusing interface is not valuable because it demands perseverance, and a paywall is not a cultural education. The distinction is functional: friction is productive only when it contributes to a capacity that matters for the activity at hand. The same delay may be meaningless in one context and valuable in another. A captioning failure blocks access; a deliberate pause before an automatic next episode may create space for reflection.

This perspective changes how platform convenience should be evaluated. The question is not simply, "How many steps can be removed?" It is, "Before eliminating a friction, what human capacity was being exercised through it?" A platform that removes the need to remember, compare, or navigate may reduce cognitive load while reducing opportunities to learn these activities. The cultural cost is not sudden incapacity, but the possibility that repeated delegation alters the habits through which judgment is formed. Convenience becomes a cultural force because it redistributes mediation from visible practices to less visible infrastructures.

Audience research treats friction as negotiation and resistance rather than a simple defect. Hill and Lunt (2026) describe audience frictions as capable of productive energy, clarifying why agency includes encountering difference, interrupting a sequence, and making an experience one's own.

6. Designing for Agency Rather Than Maximum Ease

An agency-preserving platform would not maximize ease in every interaction. It would distinguish barriers that should disappear from efforts that support cultural participation. This requires a vocabulary broader than relevance, speed, retention, or immediate satisfaction.

First, personalization should be controllable rather than all-or-nothing. Users could switch among personalized, exploratory, editorial, and profile-expanding modes. The purpose is not arbitrary randomness, but more plural selection criteria and a more deliberate relationship to them.

Second, recommendation interfaces should provide intelligible routes of comparison. A person may need to know whether an item appears because of a prior choice, editorial judgment, community popularity, or formal similarity. Explanation need not provide source code; it should make mediation contestable enough to accept, reject, or modify.

Third, platforms should build meaningful stopping cues into systems designed around continuous flow. A pause, an endpoint, or an invitation to reflect can restore temporal agency without preventing continued use. Fourth, system evaluation should include cultural objectives beyond individualized relevance. Ferraro et al. (2024), for example, propose commonality as a measure of whether recommendations help populations encounter shared and diverse cultural categories. This treats recommender systems as cultural institutions rather than only engines of personal utility.

Finally, agency-preserving design must remain attentive to context. Platform affordances are negotiated differently across cultural settings, and users may resist or repurpose them in unanticipated ways. Research on e-commerce platforms in Kenya and China shows that cultural meanings and consumer agency are produced through negotiation rather than simply delivered by architecture (Tse et al., 2025). The aim is not one ideal user, but the capacity of different users to shape how mediation enters their lives.

7. What Should Remain Difficult?

The most important question for digital platform design is not how to make every cultural encounter effortless. It is which forms of effort deserve protection. Barriers that exclude people from participation should be removed. Efforts that cultivate attention, discovery, interpretation, and judgment should not be eliminated merely because they slow the path to an immediate result.

Convenience is best understood as a means, not a sufficient cultural value. Platforms can extend access and assist users without taking over every act of selection. To preserve agency, they must leave room for browsing beyond prediction, disagreement with the profile, and encounters that cannot be justified in advance. This also means acknowledging that cultural autonomy is collective as well as individual: libraries, schools, critics, communities, and public institutions can offer alternative routes that no single user is expected to invent alone. What should remain difficult is not access to culture, but the work of deciding what culture means to us and how we want to live with its differences.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Shuting Yang is the sole author and was responsible for the conceptualization, analysis, writing, and final approval of this commentary.

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