An ethical evaluation of Facebook's social engineering practice: A media ethics perspective

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Abstract

Facebook's News Feed, which debuted in 2006, has undergone near-constant changes in the last 14 years, through which it controls what information the users interact with, giving various reasons; the most recent being to "limit fake news" and "undesirable" media content, and promote "meaningful interaction" [1]. This sometimes subtle sometimes blatant social engineering is fueled by increasing amounts of data the company captures, from new and existing users, and the way they interact with the platform – the likes, shares, where you pause on a video, which post receives more comments.

The team behind the algorithm has unwielded power over how millions of users receive information; from whom, when, and why – to not always to desired results. For instance, the 2016 update to reflect more posts from friends and family than from company pages has been linked with an increase in divisiveness and outrage, and rewarding fringe content.

There are several ethical problems with Facebook's intervention with our News Feed, from privacy to manipulation to its infringement on the freedom of information, leading to the creation of echo chambers and information bubbles, which actively compete, and often obstruct, the voice of the free press. It is the last problem which this paper will focus on.

Facebook, as a dissemination channel, acts as a news aggregator and distributor but does not follow the principles and ethics of a free press. However, its logic, reach, influence, and power has in turn forced news media outlets to change news production patterns, and shifted the

inherent value system of the media landscape in the US. Using elements of media theory and

ethics, democratic ethics, and even corporate ethics, the paper will to argue why it is the ethical

responsibility of Facebook to rethink how it approaches its News Feed, and suggest a way

forward in thinking about it.

Introduction

For the scope of this paper, we define social engineering as "arranging and channeling

environmental and social forces to create a high probability that effective social action will

occur. [2]." A media outlet is defined as a means to "transmits news, feature stories,

entertainment, or other information to the public through various distribution channels including

newspapers; magazines; radio; and broadcast, cable, or satellite television [3]." Media ethics are

the codes and rules by which journalists are expected to abide, which "serves the public [4]" in

getting truthful information about the world around them.

Quick Recap

Facebook's News Feed appeared in 2006. But up until 2009, it was just a factor of when you

logged in – showing you the newest posts first. In 2009, it "debuted a new sorting order for

News Feed based on each post's popularity [1]." In subsequent years, it kept changing and

updating the algorithm driven by three principles, with a bottom line of maximum profit. They

were:

1. Users should see more of what they want, and always feel positive

2. Users should be motivated them to stay on the platform for maximum duration

3. Users should engage and interact meaningfully with these posts. Meaningful interactions are not measured qualitatively, but quantitatively

At first glance, this not an unusual business practice. From the smallest grocery store to the largest multinational selling mutual funds, businesses experiment with their products, to see what works for the market and what does not and what brings more customers back to the business. Cultivating brand loyalty and encouraging consumer spending have been time-honored parameters of business success.
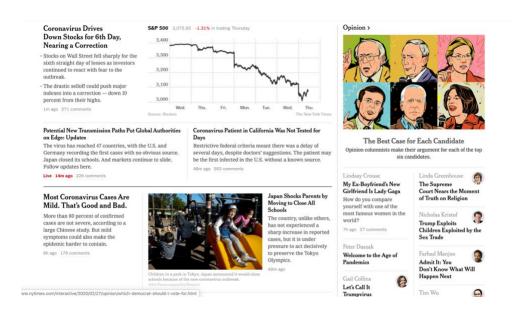
Yet, from the beginning, Facebook was in the business of information, which was formerly controlled by print and broadcast media houses.

At first, Facebook transmitted information about your friends and family, then information about everything else – ecommerce, news media, restaurants, jewelry, housing, and much more. Eventually, it established "power over the currency of democracy: information [5]". This is proven by the sheer numbers of its reach. In 2017, "The Times Company had more than 2.6 million digital-only subscriptions, which include news, cooking and crossword products [6] while Facebook had over a billion users [7] . By September 2017, about 43% of Americans often got their news online, 67% of them got it from social media, 45% of which got them from Facebook [8].

This is not to say that Facebook is the only source of news consumption, but given its user base and the amount of time people spent on it each day (this was 50 minutes per day in 2016 [9]) it has become an increasingly greater force driving how everyone, from marketers to media and news companies, distribute content at large – catering to its algorithm and trying to come up with ways to cut through the clutter.

Social Engineering's Collateral Damage

Because of its reach, every change that Facebook makes in its algorithm has a ripple effect, felt most acutely over the last few years in the practices, fortunes and shifting value systems of traditional journalistic endeavors. Take for example this screen shot of the homepage of the New York Times and posts from its Facebook page below it.

Captured from the New York Times website, on 2/27/2020 at 11:28 AM CST.

At the same time, the first five posts on the New York Times page on Facebook were:

1. "Body Camera Footage Shows Arrest by Orlando Police of 6-Year-Old at School"

2. "52 Places to Go in 2020: Richmond, Va"

3. "[Trump's Plan Backs Israeli Settlements. So Why are Settlers Unhappy?](#)"

4. "[The Extraordinary Scale of Bloomberg's Ads, in 6 Charts](#)"

5. "[It's 2 a.m. at the Louvre, and you're hanging with Leonardo](#)"

There is a clear difference in what it choose to publish on Facebook, and how it chooses to word the news information. This is not an isolated example. Research shows that all web-based providers, including traditional media houses, have shifted "their value propositions closer to the social media logic."

To keep users engaged to their content, organizations must respond to changes in the News Feed, and respond quickly. Those who do, benefit. Those who don't, stand to have lowered visibility in the information sphere that is Facebook as well as possibly reduced traffic from Facebook onto their own sites. Publishers that engage with Facebook's logic "saw more significant growth" than those who did not and the mid-2010s "dependencies between Facebook and news publishers strengthened". [10]

In the same period though, owing to competition for visibility, dropping numbers of subscribers, and reduced advertising revenue owing to competition from the very same Internet platforms that helped their traffic numbers, traditional media houses struggled with financial stability, coupled with a drastic change in their human resource pool – investing in online marketing, analytics, tracking, over core journalistic tasks of reporting, investigating, and more. This directly affects the quality of content produced by even traditional media houses. In some cases, this drove companies to outright rebrand some of their product offerings, to "take on the characteristics of

social media platforms", while also playing a role in the decline of local journalism, which has historically played a key role in upholding democracy in the US. [11]

Lastly, there is the factor of Facebook's place in the democratic information world of the Internet. Since traditional journalism, citizen journalism, misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and all other kinds of content are treated the same, "social media users might no longer feel the need to turn to traditional news outlets". [12]

Facebook's algorithm has replaced the editors of a newspaper; who would formally decide the choice of news stories, on what page they were published (which was ranked by importance), and how much importance it should receive (characterized by length of the article, the size of the accompanying image), without any of the responsibility that comes with it.

Thus, social engineering, evidently carried out to keep users on the platform and to help monetize on their time, has irrevocably changed the culture of news consumption in society, "favoring the economic viability of fake news".

To summarize, Facebook's reach and its arbitrary changes to the News Feed algorithm have ushered information into an era of uncertainty for both information and traditional media companies who are unfairly influenced by the actions of one, in this case, of Facebook. [13]

Facebook's Defense

Facebook is a technological company, with the sole aim of making profit. It does not hold responsibility for the content on its platform, protected by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which absolves publishing platforms and ISPs of taking responsibility of what users say or write on their platform. This was done to protect the Freedom of Speech, a Constitutional Right in the US.

Facebook's own principle has been to follow the principles of counterpeech doctrine, where it believes that enabling more speech allows for the collective wisdom of the crowd to shine through.

Critics of Facebook have often said that it should categorize itself as a media company, not a technological company alone, owing to its close ties with the media industry. The very nature of the algorithmic intervention in the presentation order and choice of information is considered as much editorial in nature as technological.

However, to consider it a media company could also threaten the freedom of speech users have on the platform, which has also been immensely positive – allowing for suppressed voices to shine through, giving a chance for a public space for discussion.

Facebook has played a crucial role in creating an uncertain environment for the Freedom of Press, and an information culture in which responsible journalism and truth needs to fight to be heard. Even without calling itself a media company, Facebook acknowledges its role in the media landscape – the very fact that it has made attempts to limit the spread of fake news points

to its own understanding and responsibility of this. Thus, even if it does not categorize itself as a media company, its role demands that it be judged as one.

The ethics of Facebook's Social Engineering

Media ethics are the codes and rules by which journalists are expected to abide, which "serves the public [4]" in getting truthful information about the world around them. The normative framework of media ethics this paper uses Scott R Stroud's [14] framework of pragmatic media ethics, which "builds on a pluralistic reading of ethical concerns" and employs John Dewey's three factors of "the good, the right and the virtuous".

While Stroud employed this theory to 'fake news', this papers argues that it can be applied to any attempt of social engineering by Facebook, which impacts the free flow of information, and in turn, the freedom of the press and the autonomy of the citizens.

Let's first look at the notion of the good. Facebook's attempt at any social engineering changes information flow almost immediately, and has a ripple effect across several industries, with unforeseen consequences, which is detrimental to the health of a democracy, and the discourse "becomes a utilitarian affair" which looks at maximizing good. Facebook's status as a non-media company does a maximum good for allowing for free speech, but its active, constant and profit-driven intervention in directing and redirecting that flow of free speech does minimum good for the society, and maximum only for the advertisers.

The next factor is the notion of right, evaluating whether the action of social engineering if right in itself, to borrow a Kantian bent. As seen earlier, Facebook has consistently denied labelling itself as a media company, even as it carries out many of the functions of one – chief among them, an editorial judgement exercised by way of algorithmic judgement, and its role as a curator of information. Thus, social engineering of information is a wrong in itself, no matter what the consequences, because it functions as a journalistic curator and editor, while not following the professional standards and rules of being one. It's autonomy of action, the principle that guides Kantian logic, is inconsistent inherently with the role it plays in society, and steps into the autonomy of institutional freedom of press too, as well as the autonomy of the citizen in a democracy, by given them a skewed picture of the world, the logic of which is not publicly available or fully explained.

The last factor is the virtuosity of an action, borrowing from Aristotelian ethics, "recognizing that a vital part of any moral situation will be our conditioned reactions to its details – and the reactions we desire other community members to have in that situation". Facebook's work with social engineering is an evident form of manipulating information presentation, and has resulted in shifting the value system of those producing and receiving news information, by way of its influence and system of rewarding content that feeds into confirmation biases of the readers on the platform.

Facebook is a private entity, a fact that shields it from involvement in public policy and discussions about the public good. However, its experiments with social engineering can be viewed from the lens of the normative theories of business ethics (of the NTBEs) such as the social contract theory and stakeholder theory as applicable to technology systems in a corporate

business environment [15], which is the position Facebook finds itself in, functioning in a free democratic society in the United States which upholds democratic freedoms as the "key to the construction of all policies".

The stakeholder theory states that "executives have a fiduciary duty not only to its stockholders to its stakeholders". In the case of Facebook's News Feed, the stakeholders could be broadly classified as the users, the advertisers on the platform, its employees, its board of directors and stockholders.

There is no easy way to quantify who owns the greater stake among these all (by pure numbers, this would be Mark Zuckerberg). However, the two stakeholders this paper wants to compare are users and advertisers. Currently [16], Facebook has 1.62 million users on a daily basis, and 2.5 billion monthly users. In February 2019, it had 7 million advertisers on the platform. [17] Even pure numbers put the interest of users before the interest of advertisers, although Facebook's current logic of social engineering logic takes the opposite stance. It is the ethical responsibility of Facebook to work to the interests of the group most impacted by its decisions, which are the citizens although indirectly, whose democratic autonomy is severely impacted because of Facebook's dominance in controlling information flow.

"The social contract theory states that all enterprises are ethically obliged to promote the welfare of society by satisfying the needs of the members of the society in their capacity as consumers and employees." [15] This raises the question of Facebook's role in society, which is undeniable given its scale, size and ubiquity, not to mention the increased degree to which media businesses depend on it.

There is no clear answer to this question, except that Facebook should, and to an extent does, recognize its role as an information player, evident by the measures it has taken (more on it in

the last section of the paper). As such, a social contract theory of ethics on Facebook's management dictates that the company act for the social good within that space. In the context of a news dissemination, the social good would mean empowering users with truthful, timely, information from all perspectives in a fair and just manner. Given that few people outside Facebook know exactly how the algorithm that guides the News Feed works, it may be difficult to conclusively say whether it acts justly or otherwise, but given that even Facebook cannot predict what social changes its algorithm can have, it should make them in a more ethically responsible manner.

The measures Facebook has taken

The paper argues that Facebook's attempt at social engineering require a rethinking along ethical lines. But why just Facebook? It is not the only social media platform in the world that follows non-journalistic logics of information dissemination to drive profits. Yes, but Facebook is the largest, in terms of number of users, reach and the overall influence it has as a carrier of news, on the users and the industry. [18]

Over the years, it has taken some steps to mitigate some of the collateral damage. After the 2016 change in the News Feed algorithm, it updated the system so that problematic posts and potential fake news would rank lower, and very often pull down from the platform even before any user sees it. [26]

When controversy erupted about the validity of its 'Trending Now' feature, [20], it conducted an audit into its platform to check if those allegations were true. In times of extreme crises,

such as the fight against ISIS and Al Qaeda-driven terrorism content [21] or the more recent

fight against COVID-19 (where it has a dedicated information center), the company has

stepped up efforts.

However, these are isolated issues of the extreme, far often remedial that pre-cautionary. Even

its ban on deep fakes, hailed by many as a necessary early measure to curb the potential and

future risks [22] tackles one category of content, rather than look deeper at the fundamental

way information is distributed and how the logic of customization for the advertisers' benefit is

detrimental to the health of the press. [23]

"The four areas Zuckerberg wants governments to regulate more are harmful content, election

integrity, privacy and data portability." [24] This call, while necessary, is an attempt to shift the

blame to lack of regulation, than own that some of the problem stems from the logic of its own

platform, and that the responsibility to change course lies with it.

Potential Solutions

Because the secret of exactly how the algorithm functions is not known, it is not possible to

provide a specific solution. One thing Facebook must do is create a division between social news

(posts about friends and family), and informational news (politics, health, civics, the

environment), and begin to differentiate between them. A customization logic works great for

social news, but feeds into existing confirmation biases when it comes to information.

Second, it should acknowledge its role in the media industry and work collaboratively with

journalism companies, scholars and more to rethink how technology and information can

responsibly work together.

[25].

 [16]

[27]

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