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Intro to ITWS – Section 1 “Facebook Fake News in the Post-Truth World” – Case Writeup

The question relevant to this case study is: “What is the problem with fake news and what should Zuckerberg do about it?” While the latter half of the question is quite complicated, the former half, regarding the impacts and problems caused by fake news, is much more straightforward. “Fake News” is now a cultural expression that refers to articles and stories that convey false information – often intentionally. “Fake News” stories tend to use inflammatory language and have provocative, “clickbait” titles to held gain more exposure.

The problem if Fake News is especially apparent on Facebook because of the algorithm that populates users’ newsfeeds with content. The algorithm is designed such that popular content that is similar to content users’ have interacted with before, appears higher up the feed (Wells & Winkler, 2017). Fake News articles are designed to exploit this algorithm perfectly. Their language allows them to gather lots of reactions quickly and, as they are often politically partisan in nature, appeal to a specific demographic of people.

The spread of this false information creates negative impacts – both qualitative and quantitative. During the 2016 election is became apparent that the candidate Donald Trump benefited from sites creating pro-trump Fake News. While the effect that these articles had on the outcome of the election is debated, the nation’s top intelligence agencies claim that the Russian government made an orchestrated attempt to support Trump (Wells & Winkler, 2017). There’s a clear ethical dilemma hear. One of the cornerstones of democracy is having an open and responsible press that encourages the debate and refinement of ideas and methodologies. Drowning out the facts with falsehoods destroys the foundations upon which democracy is built. Zuckerberg himself has asked his company “Are we building the world we all want?” (Wells & Winkler, 2017), showing that Facebook is a company that should care about these kinds of problems.

In addition to the moral questions, there is quantitative, business standpoint to the Fake News problem. By now, the world’s news agencies and providers are aware of the problems posed by Fake News and are seeking methods to correct it. Google is using a process by which is selectively reviews websites suspected of spreading false information and then stops offenders from receiving revenue from AdSense – a strong disincentive (Isaac & Wakabayashi, 2017). Independent developers are working on projects that use machine learning techniques to identify articles as fake (Bort, 2016). It’s clear that news aggregation sites will start using techniques to filter out Fake News stories in the near future, so if Facebook wants to remain relevant, it’s going to have to come up with ways to deal with this problem as well.

So, what can Facebook do to combat the spread of Fake News? On a brighter note, the corporation has already started working on some features to address this problem. Similar to Google’s approach, the corporation is identifying particular “troll sites” as such and cutting their ad revenue. It has additionally implemented measures such as “Related Articles” – a feature that shows fact checked and high-quality content next to articles in a user’s feed to help give a story more background and context (Ong, 2017).

It seems as if the Fake News problem is ultimately going to be an issue of automated detecting – building software that uses machine learning and pattern recognition to determine which stories are fake and which are truthful. Prototypes of such software are already existent and the framework for the implementation of such a system already exists now on big sites like Facebook and Google (Bort, 2016). This approach is best because there is simply too much information out there to be reviewed and processed by humans alone. While critics may argue that this approach gives the power to determine truth to the software engineers behind these filtering algorithms, these algorithms can combat any bias in their programming via a variation of the “Related Articles” idea that Facebook currently uses.

As we’ve established, most “newsfeed” propagation algorithms are designed to give users more content similar to content they’ve interacted with before. But what if the opposite were true? As demonstrated in a hackathon held at Yale University, it’s possible to show users content that may disagree with the sentiment they’ve expressed beforehand (The Irish News, 2017). If a person reads far-right, pro-Trump news articles on Facebook, under this new system, that user would sometimes be shown more moderate or liberal content in their Newsfeed.

Such a system could be built off of the “Related Articles” feature and some of the fake news detection software discussed earlier. When an article is determined to be fake, reputable content that examines the issue from multiple perspectives could be displayed as well – effectively drowning out the Fake News in factual debate. Such a system strikes a healthy balance between regulation and personal freedom. Users are protected from deliberate falsehoods but are given the option to make their own decision from all available information.

The implementation of such a system ultimately comes down to the issue of profits vs ethics. Algorithms that feed users more of the same are popular because people like them – everyone loves being proven right. While this new system may make a person’s newsfeed less pleasant to read and thus cost corporations subscribers, people like Mark Zuckerberg to take responsibility for the power their websites have and do what they think is best for the world.

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