I was recently contacted by a new media startup who told me that they had come up with this brilliant idea for how to 'fix the problem with the filter bubble', and asked if they could show it to me. As a media analyst, I obviously said yes, and...well...then they showed me the same old concept that I had seen so many times before, of trying to fix the filter bubble by just showing people alternative viewpoints from several sources. This is a concept that many people in the industry think would work, but it completely misunderstands what the problem really is, and instead of fixing the problem, we are actually making it worse. But not only that, we end up creating media sites that have no usefulness or relevance for anyone to read. So, let's have a discussion about why we need to approach the filter bubble in an entirely different way. First of all, let's just start by debunking the whole filter bubble itself. There have been many studies around how people consume media, and they have all found that the problem isn't what people think it is. First of all, the digital world has enabled people to be exposed to far more news, from far more sources than ever before. This is something we have seen throughout the past 20 years. For instance, we saw this all the way back in 2010, when PEW studied news consumption (as they do every day). But here is the thing. PEW studies when people consume news, but only certain things are characterized as 'news' as far as PEW is concerned. On top of this, there is also a massive level of exposure to news from many other sources, which PEW do not consider. For instance, if you ask *"did you read the news yesterday?"*, people think you are asking them if they visited a newspaper site. But in reality, we get news from everywhere, every day. We get news from YouTube. We get news from friends to a much greater degree than before via social channels, and so forth. So, we know that the volume of news that people now get is much higher than ever before, but also that they are getting it from a much larger number of sources. You might argue that this is 'part of the problem', that the reason people become misinformed is because they are now also getting their information from other sources who might not be very accurate. And I agree that is a problem. But it's not a *filter bubble*. Being in a filter bubble means that you are somehow only exposed to **one set of information**, but that's not what is happening here. If you actually measure how much information people are exposed to, you will immediately see that the public are exposed to more viewpoints than ever before. This is the opposite of a filter bubble. Another thing we know is that there is a very sharp generational divide. We know, for instance, that it's mostly the older generations who end up sharing fake news. In fact, those above 65 share more than 7 times as much fake news as those aged 18-29. We also know that news sites like Fox News generally have a very old demographic. This is weird, because in the media industry we keep attributing the filter bubble to young people, like blaming YouTube for creating a filter bubble for recommending similar videos. But when we look at young people, we don't see the same problem as we do with the older generation. Yes, young people watch much more content from YouTube, but they are also sharing much less fake news. On top of that, we see that young people have a much wider news consumption; they check more newspapers; they often spend more time verifying stories by checking what others read, or say about it; they often turn to search, and they are generally far more skeptical about any single source. This has been proven in studies again and again. So, we don't have a filter bubble, at least not for the younger generation. It's a myth that is very easily debunked. What we do have, however, is a **decision bubble**. Something we see all the time is that there are many people who end up believing something that simply isn't true, and it is quite painful to watch. Let me give you a simple example. Take the flat-Earthers. I mean... they are clearly bonkers in their belief that the world is flat, and when you look at this you might think that this is because they are living in a filter bubble. But it isn't. You see, the problem with the flat-Earthers isn't that they have never heard that the Earth is round. They are fully aware that this is what the rest of us believe in. They have seen all our articles and they have been presented with all the proof. In fact, when you look at how flat-Earthers interact online, you will notice that they are often commenting or attacking scientists any time they post a video or an article about space. So flat-Earthers do not live in a filter bubble. They are very aware that the rest of us know the Earth is actually round, because they spend every single day attacking us for it. It's the same with all the other examples where we think people are living in a filter bubble. Take the anti-vaccination lunatics. They too are fully aware that society as a whole, not to mention medical professionals, all recommend that you get vaccinated. And, they also know that the rest of us think about them as idiots. They are not living in a filter bubble, but something has happened that has caused them to choose not to believe what is general knowledge. Another example of this is climate change. Every single politician fully knows that the majority of scientists have identified that climate change exists and why it is happening. But they still choose not to believe in it. In fact, there is a wonderful video about this made by VOX that illustrates how US politicians went from believing in climate change, to suddenly becoming more focused on pleasing their donors and achieving short-term voting support. I mean, just look at this video and you instantly see that the problem isn't that the politicians are living in a filter bubble. They are fully aware what conclusions the scientists have made, they even used to believe in them. But something has changed in recent years that made them 'decide' otherwise. So think about what we are doing in the media industry. We look at these problems and then we say: "OMG, people are living in a filter bubble" ... and then we think we can solve this by writing articles about, for instance, how the Earth is really round. As journalists, we think this is excellent reporting, because we are providing people with the*facts* and we are acting against the bad people in society. But in reality, articles like this have no effect on the flat-Earthers. The flat-Earthers already know all of this, they have even prepared conspiracy theories that explain why they think all of this isn't true. And they have hugely complex counter-explanations on hand. So, all you are doing here is to give them another thing to attack. This solves nothing. It's the same thing I see with media startups who try to 'fix the problem of the filter bubble' by exposing people to alternative viewpoints. For instance, the model I see most startups focus on is to identify other articles about the same topic but from opposing publications or with opposing viewpoints. For instance, if you're reading an article from CNN, these startups plan to then show you an article from Fox News or Breitbart as well, so that you can get an 'alternative viewpoint'. And the same thing the other way around... so if you read an article from Fox News, they will show you the opposing viewpoint in an article from CNN. But think about how terrible this really is. First of all, it's not going to change the minds of anyone. For instance, if you are an anti-vaxxer, getting the opposing viewpoint is not going to change your mind, because you already know that other people are telling you to vaccinate your kids. But worse than that, by constantly exposing people to alternative viewpoints, you are teaching the public not to trust anything. Because every single time they read about a fact from one news source, this startup will present you with an 'alternative fact' (for the sake of balance) from another news source. So, as a normal person, how the heck will you ever be able to tell what is true and what is not? As a media startup, you are telling people that information and facts are a matter of viewpoints, and that there are always alternative facts to be had. It's the worst thing you can possibly do. If you want people to become informed, never ever tell them that facts are a matter of opinion, and that you can just look at different opinions and then decide what you believe in the most. I mean... seriously. Why would any media startup think this is a solution to anything? It's insane! So... how do we really fix this? To really fix this problem, we need to think about this in a different way. First of all, remember what I said in the beginning of this article. The problem we are faced with today is not a **filter bubble**, it's a **decision bubble**. So already here, we can see how differently we really need to approach this. You can't fix this by trying to show people more information from more sources. Instead, we need to approach this in terms of why these decisions happen in the first place. So, we need to approach this in two ways. There is one approach for people who are already convinced by something that isn't true, and then there is another approach for normal people who haven't been 'converted' yet. So let's talk about the people who have already decided to believe something that isn't true. What we need to realize is that we cannot fix this by telling them that they are wrong. They already know this and they have just chosen not to believe it. No amount of 'fact-checking' is ever going to change that. What we need to do instead is to figure out why they made the decision to think this way in the first place. I don't really have a possible answer for the flat-Earthers, because those guys are just weird, but think about the anti-vaxxers. What makes a parent decide not to vaccinate their kids? One reason might be an economic one. In the US (in particular), healthcare comes at a very high cost, and while there are ways to vaccinate kids cheaper (or even for free), people in the US are very afraid of engaging too much with the healthcare system. So as journalists, we need to focus on that instead, because it's highly likely that many people who make this decision do so because they worry about their financial future. In other words, not wanting to vaccinate their kids might be an excuse that they cling to because of financial concerns. It's the same with climate change. Most people can see with their own eyes that our climate is changing, and they can see how this is affecting different places. But the problem is that it's 'other people's money'. So, one thing we keep hearing from US politicians is that people shouldn't believe in climate change because that would raise taxes or cause people to lose their jobs in old industries. In other words, the politicians are using the lie to win votes, by convincing people that they will be better off not believing in climate change. As journalists, we cannot change that by arguing that they are wrong. That will get us nowhere. Instead, we need to change the narrative to make it **more convenient** to believe in climate change. For instance, we need to tell people how they can save money by doing things that are better for the environment. We need to show them all the new jobs that are coming because of the new ways we are doing things. We need to help them get those jobs. We need to illustrate how you can feel better by eating 20% less meat, and give people easier ways to do that. We need to promote companies who are creating new and more efficient ways to achieve something in a more environmentally friendly way. In short, we make believing in climate change the better option. We change the narrative so that future politicians realize that they can win more votes by supporting the future environment, rather than lying about it. Mind you, I'm mentioning two problems here, but as publishers, the focus isn't to specifically support those two causes. Fundamentally, I don't believe it's the journalist's job to promote any specific cause. However, it is our job to promote real facts. And the problem we are faced with today is that people choose to believe in the lie because they think it's more convenient to them. So the only way to **promote the facts**is to make believing in them more convenient instead. This is the change I would like to see from journalists and media startups. Don't focus on telling people that what they have chosen to believe isn't true. Figure out why they think like that, and figure out how to make it more convenient to think about the truths instead. This leads us to a second problem, which is the problem with normal people who end up being misled. What does a normal person do? Well, a normal person believes that the Earth is round, because that seems obvious. A normal person vaccinates their kids, because that's what the doctors recommend. Normal people believe in climate change, because... well... we can see it with our own eyes. So, by default, normal people are fine. But then in the media, we often report about things in such a way that we create doubts. There are many terrible examples of this. One example is ITV's This Morning, which is one of the top morning TV shows in the UK. It is often doing things like this: This is just terrible in every single way. Not only are they providing exposure and attention to some random person with an opinion completely devoid of facts, they are also presenting it in such a way that it is given equal exposure to a real scientist, making it appear as if both 'sides' have equal weight. But that's not the worst part. The worst part was when they asked people **"what do you think?"** Think about what this does. First they introduce 'alternative facts' in such a way that it creates doubt in people's minds. Then they encourage people to make up their own minds by simply choosing which fact they believe in the most. In other words, they have turned fact into opinion. This is the single worst thing that we can do, because while most normal people aren't going to believe the moon isn't solid after watching this, there is a much smaller group of people who are 'on the edge' who might actually end up believing this. But this is not just with ITV, we see this everywhere. We see it in the newspapers when they invite pundits to write editorials, or when we interview them ... or even just when we report about something they did. Or take the recent show on Netflix called 'Behind the Curve', which made flat-Earthers look very silly. Again, people like you and me won't be changed because of this, nor will any of the existing flat-Earthers. But those who might change are those on the edge. In other words, we end up polarizing the public, causing the flat-Earthers to grow. So, as I wrote in my last article about election coverage, we need to rethink how to deal with attention. People like this should never have been covered in the first place. Think about this in relation to media startups. When they say that they want to 'fix the filter bubble', by exposing people to alternative viewpoints from multiple sources, they are creating the exact problem that they are trying to avoid. First of all, they are reducing the concept of facts into a matter of opinion ... which is really bad. Second, they expose normal people, who have no reason to doubt the facts they already have, to alternative and inaccurate viewpoints ... which is also really bad. Third, it completely and totally erodes all trust in the media, because how can you trust the media if every story is mixed with another story with conflicting reporting? And finally, for the people who are already 'out there', they are going to see these conflicting sources of information as proof that their weird conspiracy theories are right, because they can just say that 'nobody really knows yet'. Again... it's all really, really bad. Do not ever do this. What we need to do instead is the complete opposite of this. First of all, realize that we do not have a filter bubble, we have a decision bubble. Second, realize that the reason why people end up making these bad decisions is often because of two things. Either it is because of outside factors, where making the bad choice is the more convenient option. Or, it's because we added doubt in such a way that people couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. Third, realize that exposure and attention by itself often causes more problems than it solves. For example, by focusing on flat-Earthers, you create more flat-Earthers, even when you report about them in a negative way. So, create a media startup with none of these things. Doubt is the result of being exposed to too many stories with conflicting information, so to prevent that, we need to step up as publishers and only report about a story when we actually know what is true and what isn't. Don't just report the news and then let people make up their own minds on who they want to believe, figure that out first. We also have to focus on trust and reliability. To do that we have to massively raise the bar, and we have to show our work. Show people why our information is trustworthy and reliable, by illustrating to them how this information was gathered and analyzed. Make the factual world the best choice. Focus your editorial strategy around a form of journalism where the value of reporting matches the value of the facts. Make it better for people to work towards that. I'm reminded of a recent study from PEW. They asked which professions / organizations people thought would have the most positive impact on solving future problems. At the top we had science and technology, and at the bottom... well... see for yourself. I mean... just look at this. This is how bad things are right now. So if you want to create a new media startup, focus on this instead. Make your media the place people turn to to get clarity, to have a place not only to get information, but also a place that makes it very easy to understand how that information came to be and why it is trustworthy. But most of all ... create a place that people think will have a positive impact on their own future problems. Make the facts better than the lies!