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September 3, 2020

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Ethics & Computer Science, CSCI 77800

Roose, Kevin (2020, August 27) What if Facebook is the real silent majority? *The New York Times.* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/technology/what-if-facebook-is-the-real-silent-majority.html?action=click&amp;module=Top%20Stories&amp;pgtype=Homepage>

Politicians often discuss “the silent majority”. The term, which is defined as “the majority of people, regarded as holding moderate opinions but rarely expressing them”, ([Oxford Languages, 2020](https://www.google.com/search?q=the+silent+majority&oq=the+silent+majo&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l6j69i60.2892j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)) is most often used when politicians want to reject a policy seen as too extreme in one direction (most often the left-leaning one). We cannot do this thing that is proposed, because although the left or right sides of the parties often advocate more loudly for their positions, there exist large swathes of people who disagree with both extremes; they simply remain quiet about it. After all, it is much less exciting, less ‘sexy’, to argue for things to remain the same. (Imagine, instead of “Hope and change”, “certainty and consistency”? You can see what I mean.) This article, from the New York Times, calls all of that into question and turns the definition on its head. Instead of a silent majority of moderates, the article suggests that perhaps what we need to be aware of is the larger-than-acknowledged right-wing presence on social media platforms, in particular, Facebook.

In framing the article, the audience is important to consider. The article is geared toward moderates, liberals, and the left-leaning progressives that it likely correctly assumes (who are we kidding, with big data, they know!) make up its readership. The article in question discussed the implications of social media on political and cultural attitudes in the United States. It emphasizes that the way social media functions, helps to isolate users into silos that reinforce their existing likes and interests. Because Facebook, and other social media platforms, are built to maintain users’ interest, to build engagement, and increase the duration of time spent on their platforms, the algorithms make note of what people are interested in, and what they interact with, and they feed users more of this. That is not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to more mundane things, like musical tastes; a person who is interested in stoner rock may fall down the rabbit hole and discover a new genre of music (from Metalcore to Trash, let’s say). But when it comes to politics, it is more likely to bring users to more of the same political content. And, not just more of the same party, but often more of the extreme side of that party.

The problem is that, as the article so eloquently says, “Controversy wins. Negative beats positive. All attention looks good to an algorithm.” And so people see the same side of the argument, over and over. The effect is that there are entire areas of Facebook that remain unseen by individual users. Facebook determines what a user likes, and shows them more of that – again, to drive profits and in an effort to keep engagement high and duration spent increasing. But while this is an effective means of boosting revenue, the impact on political and cultural attitudes is not being considered. This division is probably not going to have a good effect on the country. As it stands, people lose out on the possibility of seeing the other side of a story. People who are left-leaning miss out on hearing the right-wing perspective, except, perhaps, to hear someone on their preferred channels argue against it. And vice versa. And as this controversy is monetized, more creators come out tailoring their content to this market, where extreme is king and the loudest wins. But when ‘controversy wins’, democracy loses. As people are sorted into content silos and continue to primarily see things that reinforce that worldview, we will wind up increasingly divided as a nation. The question is, what is Facebook do about this?