**Friday Podcasts**

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**Episode Title:** “The Outrage Algorithm” **Podcast:** *The Facebook Files* **Date:** Sept. 18, 2021

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| **Headings** (after)  Facebook algorithm change  Why Facebook changed their algorithm.  Meaningful Social Interactions (MSI)  Benefits and Drawbacks of MSI   * Downstream MSI   Reactions to MSI  The Integrity Team & The Civic Team   * What the researchers found * Proposals they made * Facebook’s reactions to their proposals.   Current events | **Notes** (during)  Facebook Algorithm: “a complex set of mathematical equations, all adding up to a mysterious calculation that ultimately decides what you see when you log on or open the app”  Facebook announced that they were going to make a big change to their algorithm.   * Facebook changes its algorithm all the time, but not at this scale.   Different emphasis on what is going into your newsfeed (came forward and discussed it which is not normal)   * Trying to enhance your connection with friends and family.   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook CEO) says that Facebook has a lot of work making the platform safe.  Mark Zuckerberg said that the change would clean up the platform (make it healthier).   * He explained it sort of as a sacrifice Facebook was making for the greater good. * Documents leaked say that Mark Zuckerberg wasn’t telling the full story.   Internal documents that were leaked show that there was a panic inside Facebook regarding a troubling trend of a decline in user engagement that led to the algorithm change.  2017 was a terrible year for Facebook where they saw a distressing shift in user behavior (engagement metrics were declining in numerous ways)   * 2017 was referred to as “Annus Horribilis” – Latin for “horrible year.”   Engagement metrics (ex):   * How much are people commenting? * How much are they resharing? * How much are they posting original posts about their lives (original broadcast posts)?   Original broadcast posts have been going down for a while (public did not know this).  Documents show how Facebook didn’t know why engagement was going down (they had to guess).   * They thought that the old algorithm was too focused on videos, turning people into “mindless zombies” who just watch videos. * They were worried that people would snap out of their trance and stop using Facebook.   To increase engagement, Facebook would change people’s newsfeeds by changing their algorithm (more posts from people they are connected with and less from publishers).  Though Facebook said they were changing their algorithm to make their website healthier/improve the well-being of their users (more meaningful interactions), it was most likely done to increase user engagement.  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  The algorithm change relied on a new formula called Meaningful Social Interactions (MSI)  MSI is a number that measures how much a post is interacted with by people you are close to.   * Measures the number of interactions and how close the people are too you. * The higher the number, the more interactions by people who are close to you. * The higher the MSI, the more engaged you are (supposedly).   Formula: “A like was worth one point. A reaction or reshare was worth five points. A significant comment was worth 30 points. And then they would add or subtract based on how close the people who were commenting or interacting were.”  Facebook would show significant interactions to more people to get even more engagement.  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  The algorithm change stopped the decline in interactions and boosted engagement (it was a success regarding metrics)  The documents showed how harmful certain aspects of the algorithm change were and how much Facebook knew.  Wellbeing did not increase (uses did not feel better about their time on Facebook).   * People actually liked their feed a little more before the change.   MSI was not good at showing people what they wanted to see but was good at showing people things that would make them want to comment.  The algorithm favors engagement over how close you are to the person, meaning that most of the things you see are divisive posts that are really negative.   * This is probably due to a part of the MSI that predicts when something might go viral and sends it to more people (Downstream MSI)   Downstream MSI: elements of MSI that send you things that it believes that the people you share it with or that see it are going to comment on.  You see not what you want to see but what will get the most comments (which includes divisive, negative posts).  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Some companies, like Buzzfeed, are sending criticism to Facebook over the shortcomings of MSI.   * In October of 2018, Jonah Peretti, the CEO of Buzzfeed, said that MSI was basically backfiring. It was not creating meaningful social interactions but was incentivizing publishers like Buzzfeed to make the very worst kind of content. * He said, “Look, we do all this great stuff about animals and self-care that’s high quality and should be going viral, but it’s not. Instead, what’s going viral are posts like this one post that we did called 21 Things That Almost All White People are Guilty of Saying, which racked up 13,000 reshares and 16,000 comments on Facebook.” (Peretti) * Angry comments made it viral.   The algorithm is making Facebook more divisive and is encouraging publishers to make negative content.  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  “A Facebook vice-president said that any algorithm risks promoting content that is objectionable or harmful to some users. He also said that that’s why Facebook has an internal team dedicated to combating that content, The Integrity Team.”  The Integrity Team is supposed to improve the quality and trustworthiness of content on the platform.  The Civic Team is a group within the Integrity Team whose job is to focus on political content and misinformation.   * They noticed a lot of problems after MSI. * The new algorithm was pushing out misinformation and toxic content. * The more times something was shared, the more likely it was to be false.   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  The algorithm was changed based on the opinion that passive scrolling was bad and active engagement was good.   * This led to more fights (“active engagement”) over divisive/hateful content.   The researchers proposed ideas to limit negative content from going viral, such as dialing down downstream MSI.   * They found that this could decrease the spread of misinformation.   Facebook agreed to dial down the use of downstream MSI, but only for sensitive topics such as civic and health information and only in certain countries such as Myanmar and Ethiopia (overall they barely changed).  In 2020, the researchers presented their proposal to dial down downstream MSI in more locations to Mark Zuckerberg.   * He was open to this, but the company didn’t implement it. * Zuckerberg was worried that this would restrict positive media that went viral.   The researchers then started targeting big levers (trying to cause major overhauls to things that were central to Facebook’s identity).   * They started looking at the platform’s speed, trying to get people to pause for a second to think about what they were posting and making it slower for content to spread.   The Integrity Team came up with different ways to slow down the platform.   * Their biggest idea was to get rid of the reshare button. * Though this would have solved their problem, it would cause problems on the business side (Facebook would never do it). * Other ideas included making caps on the number of invitations you could send or comments you could make in a certain amount of time.   Facebook rejected all of their proposals, saying it would hurt user engagement (less usage is essentially harm to the product).  Instead of completely ignoring the proposals, Facebook decided to make them part of break glass measures (safe them for later).  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  A year and a half after not changing MSI (except in certain conditions), Facebook announced that they were doing more tests to de-emphasize parts of MSI.   * When it comes to political content, the drawbacks outweighed the benefits. * The Civic Team (lead by Samidh Chakrabarti) disbanded around the 2020 election.   Samidh said, “The challenge is almost a philosophical one, one that Facebook can’t solve alone.” | **Academic vocabulary…**  Colleague  Paradigm  Enhance  Stemming  Explosive  Declining  Alarmingly  Metrics  Frantic  Pivot  Hinged  Spurring  Neutralized  Highlighting  Effectively  Optimizing  Divisive  Provokes  Incentivizing  Propelled  Sensationalistic  Advocating  Piecemeal  Radical  Tolerate  Defacto  Disbanded |
| **Technical terminology…**  Black box  Algorithm  Annus Horribilis  Data Scientist  Meaningful Social Interactions (MSI)  Downstream MSI  The Integrity Team  The Civic Team  Big Levers  Break glass measures  Mark Zuckerberg  Jonah Peretti  Jeff Horwitz  Samidh Chakrabarti |

Unanswered Questions / Research Questions

* Identify unanswered questions and/or generate research questions based on this podcast. 5-10 questions total.

1. Why was Facebook’s user engagement going down in the first place?
2. How did Facebook reach the conclusion of using MSI to increase engagement?
3. Why does MSI favor engagement over the closeness of the connection (was this done on purpose)?
4. Why didn’t Facebook accept any of the proposals that would not have majorly change their revenue but would decrease the spread of misinformation?
5. Have there been any current actions (done after the podcast was made) that Facebook has taken in regard to changing their MSI?

Preliminary Research

* Choose one of your questions to research.
* Below, you should…

1. identify the question you’re researching
2. list your search terms
3. provide links to 4 quality sources that speak to this question
4. write a brief (5-10 sentences) summary of what you learned from those sources.

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| **Research Question:** | 1. Have there been any current actions (done after the podcast was made) that Facebook has taken in regard to changing their MSI? |

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| **Search Terms:** | **Links to 4 Quality Sources that speak to this question:** | **Info learned from these sources. 5-10 sentences.** |
| * Facebook * Meaningful Social Interactions/MSI * Current/Recent * Actions * Change | [Likes, anger emojis and RSVPs: the math behind Facebook’s News Feed — and how it backfired | CNN Business](https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/27/tech/facebook-papers-meaningful-social-interaction-news-feed-math/index.html) | After Facebook’s attempts to change MSI around 2020 backfired, the company has made some changes to its algorithms, mostly to limit misinformation and to keep up with new apps such as TikTok. To reduce the amount of anger & misinformation on the platform, Facebook has taken steps such as tweaking the MSI formula to filter out “bad interactions”, give angry reactions zero points instead of 1.5 points, let groups automatically reject posts containing misinformation, using a Click Gap metric to test if news is fake by checking the links with similar ones on the internet, and training machine learning models to classify posts as “good for the world” or “bad for the world”. What is interesting is that when Facebook first algorithmically demoted these “bad for the world” posts, it led to a decrease in how often users opened the app (an example of a drawback of engagement optimization), causing Facebook to release a weaker model. Facebook has also introduced ways to essentially personalize your feed by being able to add up to 30 friends and pages under “Favorites”. Facebook has also changed the layout of their platform and their algorithm to better compete with apps like TikTok (for example, they added Facebook Reels and changed their algorithm to prioritize content creators over family and friends). |
| [Facebook Algorithm Explained: How It Works in 2024 | DesignRush](https://www.designrush.com/agency/social-media-marketing/trends/facebook-algorithm) |
| [Understanding Social Media Recommendation Algorithms | Knight First Amendment Institute (knightcolumbia.org)](https://knightcolumbia.org/content/understanding-social-media-recommendation-algorithms) |
| [Facebook Update: Latest Facebook Updates and Facebook New Features - The Economic Times (indiatimes.com)](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/facebook-update) |