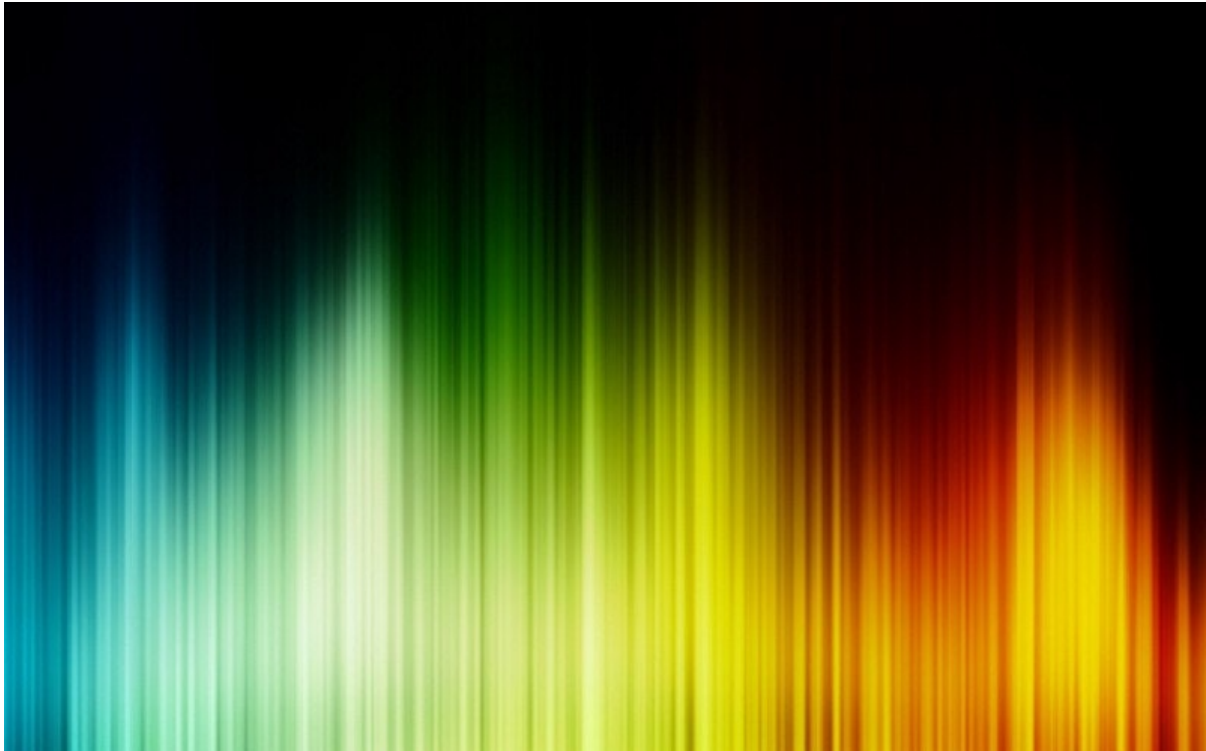


# The Platform-Publisher Spectrum

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6-8 minutes

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I think the distinction between platforms and publishers is misunderstood.

Services that exist to provide a space for people to create are considered platforms. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Yik Yak, etc. fall into this category.

Organizations that have an editorial voice and produce content, like ESPN, The New York Times, TIME, and Wired are considered publishers.

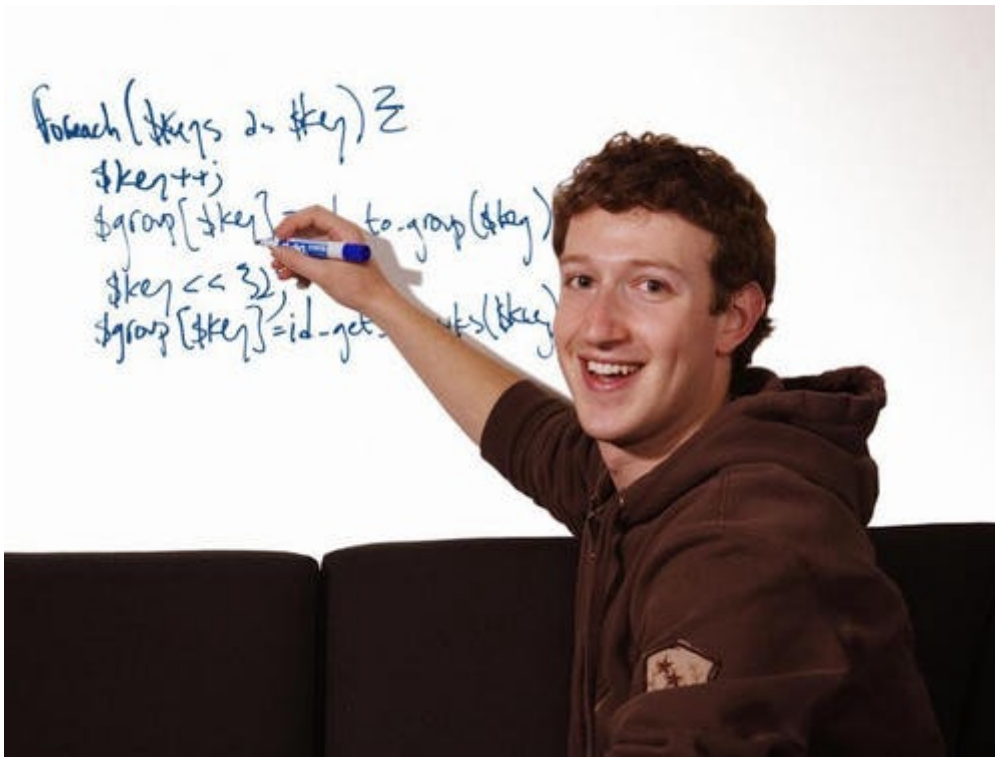
There's been a new phrase coined within the last year or so — “platisher,” used to describe platform-publisher hybrids. Medium, BuzzFeed, Gawker, and Vox are the most commonly cited examples.

“Platisher” is a sloppy name and concept. I think it's important to understand that virtually **all social/publishing platforms have an editorial element to them, even if the platforms themselves aren't directly producing content.** They're not content agnostic. On the flip side, almost every media organization gives consumers a voice in one way or another.

There are very entities that lie distinctly in the middle and could accurately be called “platishers.” **The truth is that all of these products are on what I'm going to call the platform-publisher spectrum.**

I'm going to outline three examples of platforms with publisher tendencies.

## 1.) Facebook



From the beginning, Facebook relied on Mark Zuckerberg's gut and taste to map out its path. They weren't open to the world from Day 1. They started at Harvard and then proceeded to launch at each of the other Ivy League institutions, before opening to other universities, and eventually, everyone. That wasn't random; it was a decision driven by Facebook's chief tastemaker.

Last year, news came out that the company was complicit in a study that involved Facebook tweaking the algorithm that arranges stories in the News Feed in order to see the effect it'd have on users. The results were fascinating.

From [TIME](#):

*[...] researchers analyzed over 3 million posts containing over 122 million words and used an algorithm to characterize the language as positive or negative. Facebook's data team then adjusted the amount of positive or negative Facebook language users were exposed to on their News Feeds to see how they would react.*

*Researchers [...] found that when users were exposed to fewer positive posts, they would themselves produce fewer positive posts and more negative posts. The reverse was true when they were exposed to fewer negative posts.*

The study confirmed it: Facebook has the ability to directly affect our moods simply by re-arranging the stories we see from our friends and pages we like. That's a big deal. They may not be producing content themselves, but indirectly influencing us by curating stories from people we trust may give them even more power, because it's invisible.

## 2.) Twitter

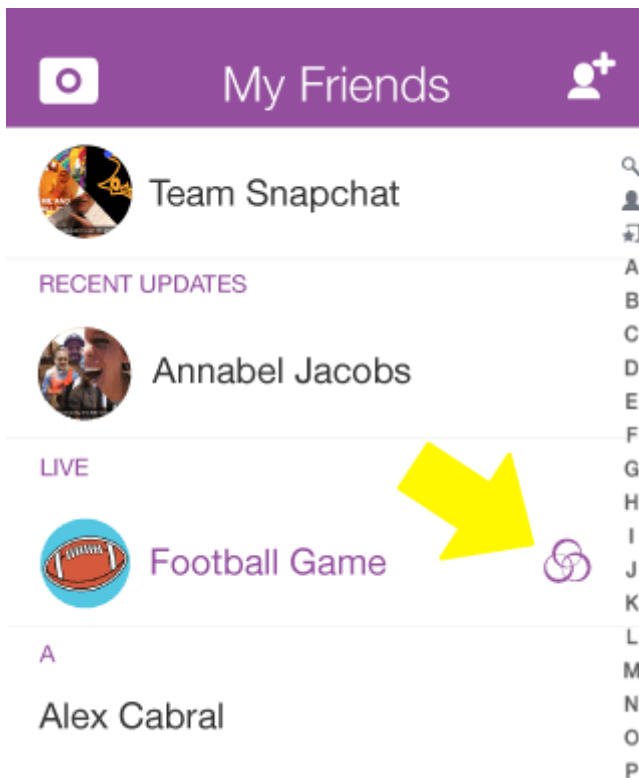


We think of Twitter as a service that's pretty straightforward. Unlike Facebook, there aren't supposed to be any algorithms. You follow people asymmetrically, and the posts from those people are displayed to you in reverse-chronological order. Fairly simple, you would think. The truth is that Twitter has plenty of editorial control over the experience.

Twitter often sets up special pages for certain events, like the Superbowl, The Grammys, and the World Cup. Not everyone is interested in these things, but Twitter has made choices about what they think would appeal to the broadest set of users. That's a choice a publisher would make.

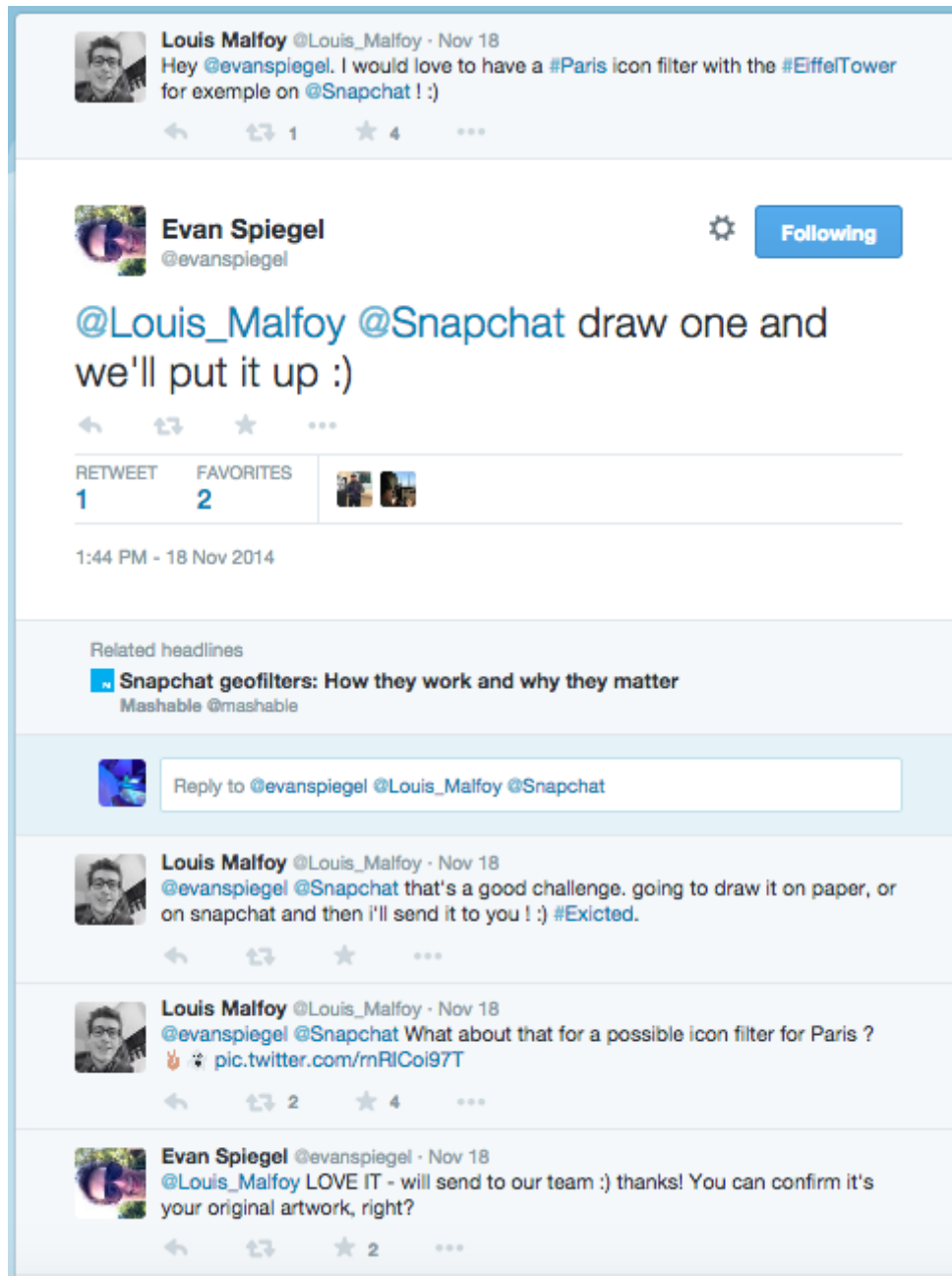
There's also a level of curation in the "Who To Follow" section that users see when they sign up and when they're using Twitter. The users highlighted in that section have a gigantic advantage over those not featured. They tend to accumulate followers, and with it, voice, much more quickly. Twitter, with the ability to add and remove users from that list, has tremendous power.

### 3.) Snapchat



Snapchat's Evan Spiegel has made his mark on his platform, too. They've only rolled out the Our Story feature to certain places. When they do a Story for things like college football games, the VMAs, New Year's Eve, etc. they have a team of curators working to select the photos and videos that'll appear in the Story.

For a while, geofilters were made exclusively by Snapchat, but they've recently opened that up. There was actually a cool exchange between Spiegel and a user in November on Twitter, before geofilter creation was open to anyone. The user wanted an Eiffel Tower filter in Paris. Spiegel tweeted him back and said to draw one. Within three hours of the first tweet, the filter was live on Snapchat. The exchange was a simple one but made it clear that Spiegel has a ton of direct influence on a product that tens of millions of 18–24 year olds are addicted to across the country.



Snapchat had emails leaked in the Sony hack that indicated that Spiegel wants Snapchat to become involved in music in 2015 — maybe even as a record label itself, with Spiegel acting as the curator. It's easy to see why Snapchat would be interested in something like that, and going down that path, how news, video, and games could be curated in a similar way.

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There is no good/bad on the platform-publisher spectrum. Different things work for different products and user bases.

With that said, if a social/publishing product is too far down the platform side of the spectrum, there may not be enough direction to spur growth. It's important to have some color and personality in a product, in order to give users a sense of what sort of content is appropriate and encouraged.

On the other hand, if a social/publishing is too far on the publisher side, it can feel suffocating and like users don't have a space to publish freely and build an audience (think celebrity-branded apps.) Users want to feel like they're in control and empowered to not only create, but influence the product itself.

In 2015, it makes total sense for companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to recruit journalists. These platforms have no shortage of great content, but sifting through it and surfacing the best stuff is a huge challenge. Journalists can help these platforms retain users by making sure they're seeing quality content. As users, we just have to remember who is ultimately pulling the levers behind the scenes (or, more accurately, designing the algorithms that do this) that determine what we see.