

Hello,

Based on my analysis and understanding of research featured in this article—[“Facebook Tried to Make Its Platform a Healthier Place. It Got Angrier Instead \(Links to an external site.\)”](#), here is my view on it: -

### Summary

In January 2018, Facebook’s (Now Meta) chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, announced their goal of helping people find relevant content on the company’s platform. He mentioned that shift is a research-backed initiative that shows that passive media consumption on the Facebook platform, especially video, is not as effective as **“meaningful social interactions”, or MSI** to strengthen the bonds between users and to improve their well-being.

However, Facebook’s training videos and internal memos show the initiative to tackle the company’s growing concern about a decline in user engagement, which typically refers to actions like commenting on or sharing posts, and users’ engagement is an important KPI to depict company’s business growth.

The purported initiative required an algorithmic change. Facebook focused on devising a formula that measures how much “meaningful” interaction a post sparked, then organize the News Feed to encourage as much of that as possible. Under an internal point system used to measure its success, a “like” was worth one point; a reaction, reshare without text or reply to an invite was worth five points; and a significant comment, message, reshare or RSVP, 30 points. Additional multipliers were added depending on whether the interaction was between members of a group, friends, or strangers.

Now, ‘News Feed’ is a proprietary algorithm controlling what appears in each user’s News Feed. It considers who users are friends with what kind of groups they have joined, what pages they have liked, which advertisers have paid to target them, and what types of stories are popular or driving conversation. Any significant changes in the algorithm can lead to major implications for the company, advertisers, and publishers.

As part of the changes, the result was if someone introduces a controversial subject and people begin to choose the anger reaction button, which is worth five points each time it is used. The MSI is rising, and more users see this in their News Feed. As more people see the post, more people are drawn into the argument. Comments get longer as users defend their positions and use reaction buttons other than the Like button. It made the angry voices louder. That tactic of trickling in the reshared, toxic, violent misinformation in the News Feed produced higher levels of comments and reactions that translated into success on Facebook. It immensely contributed to making the platform an angrier place as opposed to their marketed strategy of building a healthier socially engaged environment.

The company researchers discovered that publishers and political parties are capitalizing on the new algorithm’s heavy weighting of reshared material in its News Feed and reorienting their posts toward outrage and sensationalism as these tend to get reshared more often.

### Ethics

While Facebook’s published intent sounds philanthropic and aims for strengthening bonds amongst users to improve their mental health and well-being, in reality, it crosses the ethical boundary and violates the principles of **Belmont’s report** and **Eugene Bardiche’s “newspaper/grandma” test**.

Facebook's new approach of MSI derails from Belmont's **"Respect for Persons"** guideline where participation and withdrawal from a study should be voluntary and should be preceded by an informed consent document, outlining information about the study, potential risks, and benefits associated with it. The process change was neither communicated to the end-users, in this case, the users of the Facebook platform, nor their choice of news feed was taken into consideration. It also violates **the Beneficence Principal** of Belmont's report. According to this principle, persons should be treated ethically, their decisions, opinions should be respected, and their well-being should be ensured as well. It should abide by the objective of "Doing no harm, maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms". However, researchers found that the altered policy was incentivizing political parties to reorient their posts toward outrage and sensationalism. Lastly, in the realm of **Justice Principles**, Belmont's paper states that the burdens and benefits of a research study should be distributed equally, not benefitting a few while making the remaining majority bear the burden. With the new policy, Facebook benefitted immensely as the algorithmic change produced vastly increased traffic at the cost of a misinformed, polarized community in a toxic environment.

Through the lens of the **Grandma test/newspaper test**, when the researchers pointed out the adverse side effects of the algorithm, it put the leadership team in an uncomfortable position as they were fully aware of the potential downsides of the new process and tried deflecting responsibility using statements like, *"Is a ranking change the source of the world's divisions? No,"* or *"Research shows certain partisan divisions in our society have been growing for many decades, long before platforms like Facebook even existed."* To make matters worse, the Facebook leadership team actively turned down any effective changes suggested by their data scientist team in fear of losing user traffic.

Now, based on Facebook's approach, I feel, we need to invest in the following strategies to better engage our users to serve them ethically and grow as a company:

1. Are we taking users' consent about what type of news feed, ads they are interested in, and are we abiding by their choices? How many ads the user is clicking? How much time the user is spending on each page, ad if clicked? Is a user revisiting any pages, if so, how frequently? From how many devices the user is logged in? What type of activity the user is engaged in, just browsing, sharing reactions, commenting, sharing with others, resharing, etc.?

These are fairly straightforward questions (**Type 1**) and can be answered using the login information, user's preferences, browsing history, and connection details.

2. What type of user demographics, age groups/socio-economic classes are most frequent on the platform, and what type of pages they are browsing? Is there any day/time the usage peaks up? What is our strategy to engage our users on the platform? How we can serve them better? How to steer the non-frequent users' traffic to the platform?

Here we are trying to solve a question (**Type 2**) where our approach to catering to customers' needs is not well charted. How do we define customer demographics? How do we find out customer age groups or socio-economic classes to group them based on their similarity? What do we consider as user engagement? What do we mean by "better serving"? What are users' interests? How we can track their change of interests and level of interest? It's an achievable task but, will need some brainstorming, analysis, and game plan to answer these types of questions.

3. How reliable or authentic are the sources of the information that we are supplying to our customers through the news feed? How the different user groups are consuming the information that we are providing? What is happening after they gather the information served through our platform? Are they misusing it? Are they taking it in a harmful direction?

These questions (**Type 3**) and our paths to address them are not the clear territory and are fast-evolving with many dynamics. How do we define the reliability of the news source? Should we attempt detailed fact-checking before publishing the news items? How do we fact-check them? What level of detail the users are interested in? Can we detect possible misuse of the information and any possible lineage? Are we able to run the policy in the test and control groups? Can we pick up frequently used code words to decipher to rule out any possible adverse effects?

While we are always trying hard to best serve our users, we should always focus on integrity, dignity, ethics, and privacy. As a company and service provider, it's our utmost responsibility to form a healthy environment to serve better.

Please let me know your thoughts. We can chat in detail in our next connect.

Thanks,

Srila

#### Ref

- [The Belmont Report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research \(Links to an external site.\).](#)
- [A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving](#)