Ethical Implications of the Facebook Newsfeed

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1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of our everyday lives in the digital age. It has transformed the way we communicate and interact with each other and how we consume information. Facebook is one of the most prevalent social networks and has experienced rapid growth since its inception. It plays a significant role in shaping users' online experiences through its Newsfeed feature. The Newsfeed curates a personalized stream of content to present users with relevant and engaging posts from their connections, pages they follow, and other sources. The curation is done by Facebook's own proprietary algorithms designed to analyze vast amounts of data and tailor content based on user preferences and behavior.

In the following, we will explore the inner workings of Facebook's Newsfeed algorithms and examine how these algorithms shape the information landscape for billions of users worldwide. By looking at the values and goals underpinning the design and implementation of these algorithms, we seek to understand their implications on user experiences and the broader societal impact.

In the following sections, we will explore the mechanisms employed by Facebook's algorithms to personalize Newsfeeds and look at real-world examples to demonstrate how specific values and goals are reflected in this process. Also, we will critically discuss the ethical implications arising from algorithmic curation, addressing concerns related to echo chambers, privacy, and the potential for manipulating user behavior.

As the power of social media platforms continues to grow, it is essential to analyze the impact of algorithmic Newsfeeds on user autonomy, information diversity, and societal cohesion. Understanding the values embedded in these algorithms and addressing their ethical implications can pave the way for a more responsible online world, fostering a healthier ecosystem that respects individual freedoms while mitigating harmful consequences.

2. The Facebook Algorithm

The Facebook Algorithm is essentially a set of rules that determines what users see in their feeds. When the Newsfeed launched in 2006, the algorithm was relatively straightforward. It simply showed the activity of the user's connections. It advanced in 2009 when a ranking system was introduced, which put the posts that would boost engagement at the top of the page. Nowadays, the algorithm is much more sophisticated and supported by Artificial Intelligence, but Meta, the company that owns and operates Facebook, still controls the algorithm's goals. (Oremus, Alcantara, Merrill, & Galocha, 2021)

To learn about Metas Goals for the Facebook algorithm, we must remember that Meta is a publicly traded company headquartered in the United States. Because the company is public, it is under constant pressure to grow revenue year over year to appease its shareholders.

Usually, if a company does not achieve their revenue targets, the board of directors can replace the company's CEO who then replaces management to turn the ship around and make more money. However, Meta is unique in this case as it is purposely structured in a way that founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg cannot lose power within the company.

When Meta went public in 2012, investors were able to buy class A shares which equal one vote each at the companies general meetings. But a selected few were issued class B shares, which are not publicly traded and are worth 10 votes each. As of 2022, Mark Zuckerberg owns just about 13.6% of all total shares. But with most of them being class B shares he alone controls more than 57% of the votes. (Humphrey-Jenner, 2022)

This is an ingenious way for the founder to remain CEO and keep his company. Still, it also means that Zuckerberg can exercise immense power over Meta, Facebook, and the Facebook Newsfeed algorithm. One could argue that brings with it the benefit of the algorithm being untouchable. There would be no way to alter anything about the algorithm's behavior without the CEO's consent. However, if we turn this around, Zuckerberg can have his engineers change the algorithm by his command without the need to justify his decision. He might not even have to make this information public. When we talk about the implications of the Newsfeed algorithm, we must never forget that a single man theoretically has the power to change it all.

2.1 Benefits of the Newsfeed and Facebooks incentives

In order to generate revenue, Meta relies on selling advertisements. By collecting data about users and personalizing the ads served to them, they are much more likely to engage with the ad and buy the product. Therefore, advertisers are willing to pay more money the more personalized the ad is, incentivizing Meta to collect user data continuously. Collecting data and serving ads is only possible if the user keeps using the site regularly; the longer, the better. Meta has a strong interest in building its algorithms to maximize user engagement and time spent on the site, regardless of whether that might be healthy for the user.

The Newsfeed offers a continuous string of personalized and engaging information that keeps the user on the site. This is a great way for Meta to collect more data and serve advertisements to the user. Essentially, the Newsfeed is an excellent way for Meta to make money.

Despite Meta's incentives, it cannot be ignored that the users are also able to take advantage of the Newsfeed to some extent. There are many dangers that will be discussed later on, but to the average user, the Newsfeed serves as entertainment and an easy way to stay up to speed on what is going on in the world. The feed aggregates News from the user's connections, other creators, and commercial publishers, which might seem to the naked eye as the perfect

one-stop-shop solution, and to users who use the feature to a limited extent in a healthy manner, that might even be true if all parties play by the rules.

2.2 Unintentional Manipulation of the Newsfeed

There exists a threat of manipulation of the Newsfeed, whether that my be done intentionally by third parties or accidentally. While Meta is in control of Facebook's algorithms to a certain extent, errors can happen and a new version of the algorithm might pass internal testing and validation, but fail to some extent during deployment to billions of users. This is especially true when there is an AI component to the algorithm, since AIs are basically a black box. They can be trained and validated, but no one can know exactly why an AI decides to behave the way it does.

For example, if the algorithm is tasked with maximizing time spent on the platform, it is likely to prioritize polarizing topics that keep users in discussions and further interactions. These polarizing topics might be politically charged, controversial, or even promote extremist content. Without proper monitoring of what the algorithm promotes, the Newsfeed might turn into a slideshow of extremist statements. In this case, the feed serves a highly distorted view of the world, but users still expect it to be a representation of current topics. Without users realizing how biased their Newsfeed is, this might serve to severely alter their views and behavior.

Luckily, this type of runaway algorithm is something even Meta seeks to avoid, as this would likely scare advertisers away from the Facebook platform since they usually avoid placing their products next to content they deem unfit for their brand image.

But even if Meta does its best to keep the algorithm in check, something will likely slip through the cracks because of the sheer size of the platform. A big problem is third parties figuring out what the algorithm particularly prefers to promote at any given time and using it to their advantage. For example, a small group of politically charged, extremist protesters might figure out specific keywords that make the algorithm pick up their posts and prioritize them for users in their country. Suddenly they have manipulated Facebook into serving as their platform to promote their ideals, no matter how flawed they might be. If this case is brought to Meta's attention, they would likely be able to shut down the situation manually, for example, by blacklisting the keywords used. Nevertheless, an event like this can cause irreversible damage. The spread of Misinformation might be contained after a short period of time but the effect it has on people can stay for longer. The instigating group of people might still grow significantly, incentivizing others to attempt the same.

2.3 Intentional Manipulation of the Newsfeed

An arguably even more significant danger is the intentional manipulation of the algorithm by Facebook or influential third parties. If Meta developed the intention to, for example, stir the political climate within a country in a political direction, it would be relatively easy to modify the algorithm in that way. By prioritizing articles and posts that favorably present Meta's own interests or even going as far as to outright blacklist the competition, the broad mass of users can be manipulated into agreeing with a particular stance. If done correctly, this behavior can be almost undetectable since no additional regulatory body besides Facebook is moderating the platform. Furthermore, Meta is a private company, meaning they do not have to adhere to free speech laws, even in developed countries like the United States or Germany. They have every legal right to prioritize posts, blacklist news agencies, or ban users for any reason.

Of course, with how many active users the platform has, this behavior would not go completely unnoticed, but if the broad mass of users believes in the credibility of their Newsfeed, the impact on society could be detrimental.

As discussed earlier, Meta's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg remains in complete control of the company and the Facebook platform, meaning he alone could initiate a manipulation of the Newsfeed algorithm.

Even putting aside the immense power a single person holds in the case of Meta, other organizations might want Facebook to instigate such manipulation. Meta is headquartered in the United States and is therefore protected by well-developed laws and regulations. Even the United States government cannot simply force Meta to alter its algorithms, at least for now.

The National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China forces businesses registered in the country to hand over information, including user data and personally identifiable information, to Chinese Intelligence agencies and conceal the fact that they do so. (Wikipedia, 2023) Furthermore, Wikipedia states that "Article 10 makes the law applicable extraterritorially, having implications for Chinese businesses operating overseas, specifically technology companies, compelling them to hand over user data even when operating in foreign jurisdictions (…)" (Wikipedia, 2023)

If such a law was to pass in the United States, there is nothing that could be done to stop the manipulation of the Facebook Newsfeed throughout the world by the United States Government. While this is an unlikely scenario, this shows the immense power, damage potential, and fragility of the Facebook Newsfeed if control was to fall into the wrong hands.

2.4 The Dangers of Prolonged Social Media Use

With facebooks incentive to keep users on the platform as long as possible, we should take a look at the long-term effects of social media use. Constant exposure to carefully curated and idealized representations of others can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Prolonged use of Social Networks may also lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness despite the user having the illusion of connecting with others. This is especially true nowadays due to the parasocial relationships formed with influencers. Some users may spend an unhealthy amount of time consuming content from one specific creator, which might serve as entertainment, but can serve to isolate them further. An article in the Psychiatric Times states that "Social media usage has been linked to increased depression, anxiety, parasuicidal behaviors, and body dysmorphia." (Khan, 2022)

The risks of social media usage are amplified for underage users as these symptoms can seriously affect character development at a young age. Facebook's user base has gotten older in recent times. As of January 2023, 4.8% of users are in the 13-17 age group. (Dixon, 2023) While this might seem like a small percentage, we must remember that Facebook currently has about 3 billion Monthly active users. (Shepherd, 2023) We also cannot ignore that the platform does not require a strict age verification, and providing a falsified date of birth is popular among underage users to unlock the platform's additional functionality.

Another 29.9% of global users are within the 18-24 age group. (Dixon, 2023) While not underage, these users are still in the early stages of their life, where uncertainty and the need to compare themselves to others are prevalent.

These numbers show that optimizing the algorithm to maximize time spent on the platform may prove detrimental to the mental health and development of an entire generation.

2.5 Constant Availability and Echo Chambers

With it's never-ending stream of updates and notifications and the goal to keep users on the site, the Newsfeed encourages constant availability. The speed at which things happen on the internet creates a fear of missing out (FOMO) in participants, which may contribute to exhaustion, burnout, anxiety, and sleeplessness, among other symptoms. Moreover, the blurred boundaries between personal and professional life may lead to challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Another worrying staple of social media is the establishment of so-called echo chambers. Just as a user is more likely to engage with content they are interested in, they are more likely to engage with articles and groups whose opinions they support. The algorithm has a clear incentive to keep feeding the user the desired information to keep them on the platform. This creates a negative feedback loop in the perspective of the user in question, who is suddenly

only surrounded by one type of content. This is especially dangerous if the content in question is of political nature.

2.6 Facebook's Voting Incident

Now that we have examined the risks and responsibilities the Newsfeed holds, it is time to look at an example. During the 2010 midterm elections in the United States, Facebook ran a social experiment on its user's voting behavior. For a single day, Facebook displayed a message to most of its adult user base to analyze the impact of the message on real-world behavior. (Corbyn, 2012)

About 1% of users only received an informational message at the top of their Newsfeed with a clickable "I Voted" Button, and another 1% were used as a control group who received no message. A majority of 98% of users received the message with an added social component. The message showed the profile pictures of up to six contact who had clicked the Button. (Corbyn, 2012)

Researchers concluded that people who were shown the message were slightly more likely to vote. While this might be good for democracy, this experiment raises serious ethical questions. By manipulating the content displayed to users, Facebook essentially influenced users voting behavior without their explicit consent. This was a relatively harmless experiment on the real-world influence of social media, but the lack of transparency is alarming. Furthermore, Facebook used users' profile pictures as part of their manipulation of the Newsfeed without informed explicit permission.

With this experiment, Facebook has shown that it can and is willing to manipulate its services for reasons they deem acceptable. The company may have very well opened the gates to further experiments and the lack of transparency shows they have little interest in informing their users about it.

2.7 Cambridge Analytica

In 2014 the political research firm Cambridge Analytica began secretly collecting data from Facebook profiles. According to an article published by digwatch (n.d), "Political data firm Cambridge Analytica obtained the data of 50 million Facebook users, constructed 30 million personality profiles, and sold the data to US politicians seeking election to influence voters, without the users' consent."

This was achieved by creating a third-party application that prompted users to take a personality quiz. In order to take the quiz, the user had to consent to share Facebook profile information with the app. The app then used the Facebook API to gather as much data as possible. For further use of the API, Facebook granted a license to be used for research purposes only. (Digwatch, n.d.)

While this incident is not directly linked to the Newsfeed feature, it is a concerning real-world example of the weaponization of the Facebook platform. It is important to remember that the user is not entirely innocent in this scenario since they did opt-in and manually gave consent for a third-party app to access their profile. However, the average user could not have anticipated what their data was being used for.

This raises questions about how aware Meta is of its responsibilities in protecting its users. While the company did shut down the app as soon as details became known to the public, Cambridge Analytica still managed to gather data on over 50 Million users. Meta failed to adequately monitor and regulate third-party app developers access to user data, which also sparked a conversation about the power and accountability of tech giants.

3. Conclusion: Facebook's Ethical Responsibility

By now, it has become clear that Meta holds an enormous ethical responsibility to its users and the broader society. With Facebook being the largest social media platform, it should ensure user privacy by safeguarding personally identifiable information using transparent data handling processes. It needs to moderate its Newsfeed to combat the spread of harmful content, such as Misinformation and hate speech, and design its algorithms to minimize bias. The platform should also be held accountable for its impact on individuals and the real-world consequences online content can have on their lives.

The company is also responsible for preventing misuse and manipulation of its platform and algorithms. It should prioritize its user's well-being and mental health over profit and offer methods to keep the user in control of their own data.

However, these ideal ethical values stand in clear conflict with Meta's interests. It has become apparent that the company takes ethics seriously as long as it provides them with an advantage. Facebook has shown that it is willing to bend the rules for their own gain, and it has the legal right to do so. As with any other publicly traded company, Meta's first and foremost goal is for the Facebook platform to generate revenue. This is done by keeping users on the platform as long as possible with a never-ending feed of News and articles which are algorithmically curated. This gives the company immense power over its user's everyday life as it can easily influence their perception of current topics. The properties and goals of the algorithms Facebook uses to curate the Newsfeed are at the sole discretion of Meta and by extension, its founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

Facebook's Voting campaign has shown that they are willing to run experiments on their user base, and the Cambridge Analytica incident proved that they cannot guarantee user data protection.

Meta and Facebook's continuous violations of ethical responsibilities cannot be legally regulated as of now, and they become especially dangerous if users are not informed about them. The most considerable risk of the Newsfeed is that users believe it is unbiased, regulated, neutral and that it follows solid ethical guidelines because that is when users are most vulnerable to possible manipulation. As of now, Facebook stands strong, having not been seriously impacted by its previous ethical violations and scandals. The only way to control the immense power of the platform and reduce its damage potential would be proper legislation by multiple countries and organizations. Until then, the general public can only stand by and hope that the company will maintain the relative neutrality it has displayed in the past.

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