



Social Media & Civic Integrity

CS 3001 — FALL 2022

BY DR. AMY BRUCKMAN & WILSON CHEN

The Facebook Whistleblower

- ▶ Frances Haugen
- ▶ Worked at Facebook for two years
 - ▶ Disturbed by what she saw
- ▶ Tried to work within channels
- ▶ Quit and released documents from an internal mailing list to the press
 - ▶ Documents are now more generally available



Issues Raised

- ▶ Issues include:
 - ▶ Are high-profile users allowed to violate rules/treated differently?
 - ▶ Facebook is not putting much effort into stopping human trafficking.
 - ▶ Does Instagram hurt teen body image and mental health?
 - ▶ Is Facebook spreading misinformation and increasing divisiveness?
 - ▶ When Facebook finds things that are disturbing, are they sharing them with the public?

Podcast: The Outrage Algorithm

- ▶ What change did Facebook make to its newsfeed algorithm?
- ▶ What happened as a result?

Podcast: The Outrage Algorithm

- ▶ What change did Facebook make to its newsfeed algorithm?
- ▶ What happened as a result?
 - ▶ Changed it to maximize “meaningful social interactions” (MSI)
 - ▶ Points system
 - ▶ Longer comments worth more
 - ▶ Predicts “Downstream MSI”
 - ▶ Content more likely to go viral
 - ▶ Controversy leads to more “engagement”

Buzzfeed Example

- ▶ “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.” And it went completely viral. Mostly of people just yelling at each other in the comments about race and yelling at BuzzFeed for having written it in the first place. And it was that angry comment frenzy that propelled the virality.”
 - ▶ Jonah Peretti, the CEO of BuzzFeed, email to Facebook CEO in October 2018

Civic Team Proposes Solutions

- ▶ Ideas to address the problem:
 - ▶ Remove the 'reshare' button?
 - ▶ Reduce the number of group invitations you can send per day?
- ▶ Some features saved for emergencies
 - ▶ "Break glass measures"
- ▶ Bigger things like reducing Downstream MSI used only in limited contexts
 - ▶ Certain topics: health and civic info
 - ▶ Certain places: Ethiopia and Myanmar

Facebook's Biggest Problems are in the Global South

- ▶ To many in Myanmar, Facebook is the Internet
 - ▶ Same in Cuba and other nations in the Global South
- ▶ Contributed to genocide in Myanmar
 - ▶ Violence incited by Facebook posts
 - ▶ Rampant political misinformation
 - ▶ Deliberately spread by fake accounts affiliated with the military
 - ▶ Facebook slow to respond
 - ▶ Members of the Rohingya ethnic minority murdered, raped
 - ▶ 700k flee the country

Why Didn't Facebook Take Action in Myanmar?

- ▶ Language is part of the problem
 - ▶ ML moderation tools haven't been made for many languages
- ▶ Not an important market
 - ▶ Less resources invested there

Instagram and Girls

- ▶ Reported “30% of teen girls felt Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies”
- ▶ Study was for internal Facebook use
- ▶ Not peer reviewed
- ▶ Not rigorous
 - ▶ Self report data
 - ▶ Teens read in media that social media is bad for them
 - ▶ Survey asks “is it making you feel bad?”
 - ▶ More rigorous data shows no effect

Facebook Documents Need to be Read Critically

- ▶ It's just an internal memo
- ▶ Appearing in the popular press as established science

The Big Picture

- ▶ Lack of transparency
 - ▶ They don't need to tell anyone about problems they find
- ▶ Design decisions all focused on increasing site traffic
 - ▶ Don't prioritize impact
- ▶ The problem is **the business model**

Surveillance Capitalism

- ▶ Google started off just trying to do search
- ▶ The “behavioral surplus” information that is a side-effect of search allows targeted marketing
- ▶ Core Google business model:
 - ▶ Companies bid on keywords
 - ▶ Google only gets paid if the user clicks on them
 - ▶ Ranking is based on pay rate * likelihood of being clicked on
 - ▶ Highest paid keywords are things like “meselthelioma” or “motorcycle accident attorney”

Data Mining about Users

- ▶ The more they know about you, the more they can send you accurately targeted ads
 - ▶ Could be invasive
 - ▶ Could be mutually beneficial
- ▶ Started off as a side effect
- ▶ Became the driving force behind the system

Maximizing Shareholder Value

- ▶ The goal for a publicly traded company is to maximize shareholder value
- ▶ For social media, this means maximizing ad views
- ▶ What incentives does this create for the company?

Corporate Secrecy

- ▶ No obligation to disclose impact on users or communities
 - ▶ Anything they learn is proprietary/valuable
- ▶ Could we have mandated disclosures?

Disincentives to do Research

- ▶ Platforms doing science about their impact is good
- ▶ But if that research leads to public relations debacles, they will cut down or stop doing it
- ▶ How do we encourage research to continue?

How Should We Handle Posts Related to Human Trafficking?

- ▶ Answer from the point of view of maximizing ad views
- ▶ Answer from the point of view of improving the lives of users and communities
- ▶ All of these dilemmas are being answered by someone whose primary goal is to maximize ad views



What's the Solution?

What's the Solution?

- ▶ Hard question.
- ▶ Funding model?
 - ▶ More non-profits?
 - ▶ Funded by public dollars
 - ▶ B-corporations?
 - ▶ For-profit, but given certification of 'social and environmental performance'
 - ▶ Example: Patagonia, Ben & Jerry's, Coursera
- ▶ Lots of platforms with competing values?
 - ▶ Find one that suits you

Maximizing shareholder value/ad views/profit will never make the right thing happen for individuals or communities