American Truth: How the Facebook Algorithm Heightens Political Partisanship and Misinformation

Jonathan Rosenberg

In this time of hotly contested elections, a global pandemic, and an ever-changing political climate, social media has become more of a driving force for partisanship in America, as well as a vessel for the spread of misinformation. Under the current algorithm Facebook uses to promote posts, misinformation and clickbait run rampant, paving the way for a more misinformed and divided population of Americans online. Those with vested interests in more time spent online argue that the platforms should not be held accountable for the content on their platform as it pertains to politics. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, for example, has sat before Congress numerous times on the subject of big tech's influence on information, arguing that they are not the policing system but rather a platform, and therefore they are not accountable for the content that is posted. Regulation of social media companies has been heavily debated by legislators, politicians, and tech executives, and includes issues of free speech, the Communications Decency Act, and the potential damage of heavy partisanship. While opponents may claim that social media companies such as Facebook should not have stricter content policies, these platforms with engagement-driven algorithms not only exploit and deepen our partisan divide, but introduce misinformation and conspiracy theories to the public. Companies like Facebook should be held responsible for what is put on their platform, and more stringent rules about misinformation posting should be imposed.

While some believe that companies like Facebook should not have to be responsible for the content that gets posted on their platform, the misinformation and political partisanship that are spread by them ultimately warrant checks-and-balances in the form of regulation. Many high-level tech individuals believe social media companies themselves are just a platform, and therefore should not be held responsible for what is posted. This common opinion comes from the Communications Decency Act of 1996, where it was established the government was not able to limit pornography on the internet, despite concerns that children would become exposed to it.[1] Section 230 of this bill is still hotly contested today, with many Republicans claiming Democrats are trying to censor conservatives, including when Twitter and Facebook put warning labels on Trump's postings. The censorship Republicans have claimed in Congress when CEOs like Zuckerberg have sat for questioning is in fact the opposite of what's going on on social media platforms. In reality, conservative voices, especially those that intend to provoke outrage against the other side, are heavily promoted under the Facebook algorithm, and the platform has disproportionately pushed conservative content since 2017. To Facebook and Twitter's credit, the small banners on some social media posts recently instituted before the election to point out misinformation is a small step in the right direction of debunking misinformation online and stopping the spread. That being said, it is currently not nearly enough. Warning about misinformation online is not censorship, as the goal is to inform the user about a reliable set of facts. A lot of misinformation is spread despite the warnings because it gets attention and provokes outrage.

---

[1] Exec. Doc. (). https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230.

In the aforementioned 2017 algorithmic shift within Facebook, the website began promoting posts with high engagement as a way to prioritize the most 'high quality' content. With 'angries' being weighted equally to other forms of interaction, users are being recommended highly divisive and sometimes misleading articles and information that weaken our country's grasp on what is true. In a NewsWhip study that covered three months of 2019 Facebook activity, the most shared and interacted-with post was a misleading article from the Christian Broadcasting Network, which claimed in its headline that New York was to start allowing abortions up until birth. This claim has been disproven by USA Today.[2] The ruling only accounted for situations where the mother's life is in danger, but the virality of the post speaks to how effectively misinformation and highly divisive content spreads on Facebook. The likes and shares prompt the post to be thrust into more peoples' recommended feeds.[3] The study also examined which news outlets and websites were shared the most. Conservative outlets dominated the top, and other networks like CNN were only comparable when a highly controversial article was published. Fox News, Ben Shapiro's website, and Breitbart were the sites with the highest number of 'angries'— the angry version of the set up on Facebook where a user can immediately react to a post with an emoji instead of writing a comment — from January to March of 2019 on Facebook. What the study makes clear is that since sensationalist and misleading articles are what get shared and reacted to the most, they are also the ones getting dispersed the most by their algorithms across the platform. The engagement-prioritization change was an effort to make time on Facebook "time well spent." Instead the effects have been that anger and fear dominate the platform, and fear-mongering reigns supreme.[4]

In addition to promoting posts with high levels of engagement (positive or not), the new changes to Facebook also grew the popularity of Facebook Groups, small social circles of chat rooms, initially intended to bring together people with similar interests and passions. Today, Facebook Groups are considered dangerous among experts, and have become a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation. In an episode of "All Things Considered" from NPR News, Sarah McCammon interviews disinformation researcher Nina Jankowitz about Facebook groups, and their potential to disseminate misinformation and hurt communities.[5] Jankowitz restates the reason for the rise of Facebook groups, as CEO Zuckerberg wished for a Facebook with more social interaction with people similar to the user. Jankowitz emphasizes that Facebook groups are "highly emotional spaces," and that after users join one group the service pushes them toward others, so sometimes regardless of the initial community they joined, they may be recommended more fringe communities, and are led down a rabbithole. Facebook groups proliferated fast, and bad actors quickly gained access to do harm. These groups can be made secret, and the sheer number of them hurts the potential for moderation, making many Facebook Groups prime areas for disinformation to spread. Starting on a smaller text-based platform called 8chan, the conspiracy group "QAnon" created an anonymous poster online with the alias "Q" posing as a top-secret high ranking government official. "Q" has made claims such as that Hillary Clinton should/would be arrested, and that Donald Trump is a savior for fighting against a Democratic ring of pedophiles. The group is known for provoking violence, and their extreme support for President Trump. Through Facebook Groups, more and more individuals have

---

[2] Dunn, "Fact Check"
[3] Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray, "Understanding Echo"
[4] Owen, "One year," NiemLab
[5] Jankowitz, "'Facebook Groups," interview, NPR

become part of the conspiracy, with more than 4.5 million users subscribed to Q-related groups as of August attempting to decode these "Q-drops" (messages from Q).[6] In the past November election, a QAnon-believer Majorie Taylor Green was elected in Georgia's 14th Congressional District, a prominent red flag that the conspiracy theory is spreading and becoming widely believed. Recently, Facebook banned many accounts related to QAnon, a step in the right direction of limiting conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, QAnon provides an accurate case study for the way misinformation disseminates like wildfire on Facebook, and why it should be actively prevented.

While disinformation can be spread just by users engaging with outrageous material and Facebook Groups, a prime example of an area Facebook must change is their political ad system: untrue information is permitted, directly allowing those who run for office a large platform to blatantly lie. Political activist Adriel Hampton registered to run for governor of California for the sole reason of exposing Facebook's political ad policy.[7] This political ad stance allows political candidates to air any kind of ad, even if it contains disinformation. Hampton put this policy to the test first by simply publishing a fake ad that stated that Republican Senator Linsdey Graham endorses the Green New Deal, cutting together misleading quotes and imagery. It was taken down by Facebook nearly immediately, so Hampton then wanted to see if he got different treatment when he was running for political office. In this context, the ad stayed up slightly longer but was taken down again with Facebook arguing that a candidate must be actively campaigning, not just registered. Additionally, they informed him that if he does not currently hold political office, he might also not be allowed the exemption. What Hampton worries about are politicians like Donald Trump and his campaign with lots of money and political power being able to spread disinformation on Facebook with no consequences because of their ad policy. One change Facebook implemented ahead of the November 3rd, 2020 election was a ban on political ads after election day to prevent the spread of misinformation from either campaign.[8] While a nice preventative measure, critics like Senator Elizabeth Warren argue that this temporary ban will not fix the systemic route of the problem of "Facebook's refusal to regulate its ads," and that a real upheaval and reexamination of the system is necessary to reduce untrue information from spreading. It is clear that Facebook does not want to be a policing system, but in a country that is increasingly dependent on Facebook for news and information, an unregulated political ad system will remain catastrophic and polarizing.

Facebook, while claiming to be an equal playing field of free speech, strengthens partisan divides and causes more notable political shifts than other social media platforms. Like targeted advertising for products and material goods, political ideologies and candidates are targeted on Facebook in more specific ways than ever before. Individuals, then, are more self-contained in their own bubbles. Yale Law School graduate and political writer for Wired, Gilad Edelman, covers a study from researchers at Northeastern University, USC, and the nonprofit Upturn about the way political ad buys on Facebook work, and how it actually costs more for campaigns to reach the other side of the aisle, exacerbating an already existing political divide based on algorithmic inferences about user preferences.[9] The researchers in the study made identical ad buys in Charlotte, NC: one for Donald Trump, one for Bernie Sanders, and one generic "register

[6] Dunn, "Fact Check"
[7] "Man running," video
[8] Paul, "Facebook announces"
[9] Edelman, "How Facebook's," Wired

to vote!" advertisement. Although the buys were in the same area and the generic ad was shown equally, 65% of registered Democrats were shown the Sanders ad, whereas 40% of them were shown a Trump ad. Additionally, it cost the Sanders group 50% more to show an ad to someone across the aisle. While to some degree television ads could be targeted based on the program aired when the ad runs, the problem is much worse over social media. Facebook refutes the study, arguing that their job is to serve the customer the ads most relevant to them, but the targeting of political ads at such a specific level will only cause deeper partisan divides if there's a financial disincentive to convince the other side. Political campaigns on Facebook are being treated as another product being advertised, and are being shown based on inferred biases and preferences that only grow deeper when they are not shown the other side. While campaigns have been able to target certain demographics by choosing certain TV stations to advertise on, the personalization of Facebook makes it even easier to target hyper-specific groups of people to try to sway. In addition to the way political ads are marketed, the recommended posts one sees on Facebook are directly related to past clicks and what other people are engaging with. This phenomenon has been documented in a University of Virginia study that examined various social media platforms' impact on political ideology and partisanship, specifically researching how increased time spent online can change the content that is displayed.[10] The study found that increased usage of Facebook overwhelmingly caused right-leaning partisan shifts, as opposed to the more centrist and wide-ranged impact of Reddit, or the slightly less right-leaning shift that occurs when one consumes more mainstream news (see Figure One). In a news environment where increased consumption already moves political beliefs to the right, Facebook takes it even further.
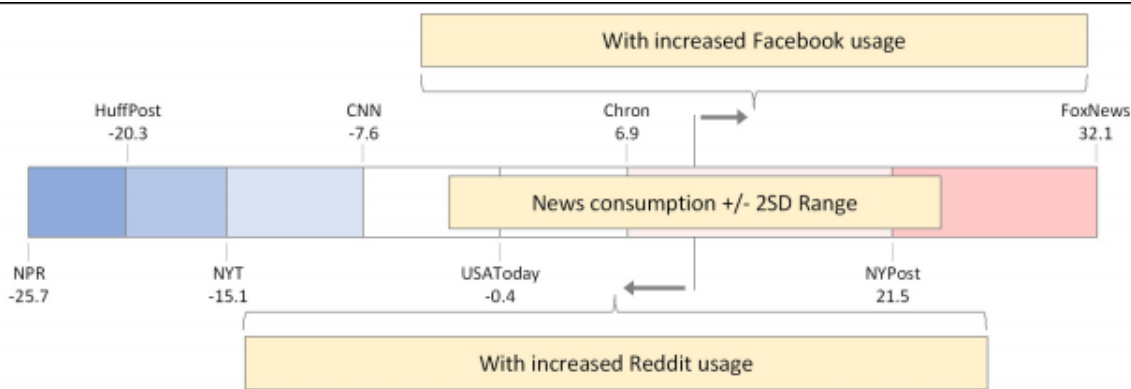

Figure One: Facebook users experience a greater partisan impact than other news sources, disproportionately to the right as compared to Reddit and cable news consumption.[10]

In addition, the study also examined the predicted partisan shifts from this increased usage. The study divided a group of people into liberal, centrist, and conservative tertiles. On Facebook, those in the conservative tertile on average spent more time on the platform and were directed to conservative sources. While this may seem predictable, what's noticeable is that the liberal tertile, in contrast, while shown more left wing content, was far less radical and closer to center in their news consumption. What this study makes clear is that there is an unbalanced "advantage" for conservative news sites on Facebook, and the site is far from an even playing field. The very forces that drive users to conservative sources are the exact same ones that cause

---

[10] Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray, "Understanding Echo"

disinformation to spread. Currently, material online that provokes outrage or contains disinformation dominates Facebook. Without any sort of regulation, the U.S. will continue to become more divided. Preventative measures against misinformation will help combat the partisan polar shift, as more users will be presented with facts as opposed to misinformed outrage, and be able to make their political opinions for themselves.

While Facebook has begun to take some action against misinformation, it is not nearly enough to get to the root of the problem. One week before the November 3rd 2020 election, Facebook placed a ban on political ads to fight misinformed claims. This ban came too late, and does not address the deep roots of the flaws in the political ad system; however, it may be a step in the right direction towards preventing misinformation. The goal for social media companies like Facebook should not be to censor its users, but there are many creative methods of preserving truth online. A report by the Forum for Information and Democracy wrote a non-binding agreement for 38 countries, with India, Australia, India, Canada, Germany, France India, South Korea and the UK included to promote and strengthen democracy, including a section with recommendations specifically about social media solutions to misinformation.[11] One suggested preventative measure to limit misinformation is to fact check viral content before it becomes too "engaged-with." Additionally, this report proposes limiting the specific targeting of political ads, which would allow users to see more content from the other side of the aisle and prevent echo chambers. The report recommends solving the paywall problem of reaching certain voters as described in the aforementioned Sanders/Trump ad study. Many sources, including the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Christopher Wylie, argue that social media companies should be required to consider safety implications about what their algorithms are currently doing to the public. This is the exact root of the problem, because social media companies need to prioritize the wellbeing of the people over their company profits.

Ultimately, political partisanship and misinformation online pose extreme threats to the strength of our nation and the capacity we have to unite, especially in catastrophic times such as in the COVID pandemic. We simply need everyone to be operating under the same set of facts to be a sustainable democracy, or else we won't have the chance to debate how to solve problems — only whether or not they exist. Our partisan divide will only continue cutting deeper if there isn't some way to mitigate Facebook's hate-driven algorithm that encourages divisiveness, and there need to be better guardrails to let people know what is misinformation. The goal is not to censor certain political ideologies, but to inform consumers about what is true, and ensure they are recommended balanced perspectives.

---

[11] Fox, "Social Media"

Bibliography

Dunn, Adrienne. "Fact Check: New York Law's Abortion Law Doesn't Allow Any Abortion 'up until Birth,' as Claimed." *USA Today*, April 30, 2020. Accessed December 14, 2020. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/04/30/fact-check-andrew-cuomo-n ew-york-law-does-not-allow-abortion-up-until-birth/3014473001/.

Edelman, Gilad. "How Facebook's Political Ad System Is Designed to Polarize." Wired. Last modified December 13, 2019. Accessed November 15, 2020. https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-political-ad-system-designed-polarize/.

Fox, Chris. "Social Media: How Might It Be Regulated?" *BBC*, November 12, 2020. Accessed November 29, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-54901083.

Jankowitz, Nina. "'Facebook Groups Are Destroying America': Researcher On Misinformation Spread Online." Interview by Sarah McCammon. NPR. Last modified June 22, 2020. Accessed November 15, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/06/22/881826881/facebook-groups-are-destroying-america-res earcher-on-misinformation-spread-onlin.

Exec. Doc. (). https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230.

Kitchens, Brent, Steven L. Johnson, and Peter Gray. "Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption." *Management Information Systems Quarterly*, August 26, 2020. Accessed November 15, 2020. https://misq.org/catalog/product/view/id/2014.

"Man running for office so he can run false Facebook ads." Video. https://www.cnn.com/videos/business/2019/10/29/adriel-hampton-man-running-for-office -fake-facebook-ads-sot-vpx-crn.cnn.

McCabe, David, and Celia Kang. "Republicans Blast Social Media C.E.O.s While Democrats Deride Hearing." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 28, 2020. Accessed November 28, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/28/technology/senate-tech-hearing-section-230.html?s mid=tw-share.

Owen, Laura Hazard. "One year in, Facebook's big algorithm change has spurred an angry, Fox News-dominated — and very engaged! — News Feed." NiemLab. Last modified March 15, 2019. Accessed November 15, 2020. https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/03/one-year-in-facebooks-big-algorithm-change-has-sp urred-an-angry-fox-news-dominated-and-very-engaged-news-feed/.

Paul, Kari. "Facebook announces plan to stop political ads after 3 November." *The Guardian*, October 7, 2020. Accessed December 8, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/07/facebook-stop-political-ads-policy-3-november.

Wong, Julia Carrie. "Revealed: QAnon Facebook Groups Are Growing at a Rapid Pace around the World." *The Guardian*, August 11, 2020. Accessed December 14, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/11/qanon-facebook-groups-growing-conspiracy-theory.