Search engines and social networking sites use a number of signals to track interests and preferences online in order to continually display content that retains readership and activity. Building on work done around Filter Bubbles, this paper investigates the cognitive workings of a typical user in sub-consciously constructing “echo chambers” by making use of Facebook’s News Feed. Their interaction with like-minded content and the unintentional consequence of losing access to opposing or challenging information reinforces the confirmation bias that stunts social synthesis and political progression. This largely involuntary binding of users in ideological camps damages the Hegelian social dialectic and demands regulation, especially in states devoid of strong institutional frameworks capable of withstanding polarised polities.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS/ RECOMMENDATIONS**

- ICTs are widely recognised as one of the greatest economic multipliers in history, and are charged with having significant knock-on effects for economic development.
- At the same time, the trend acknowledged as the most responsible for drawing demand to ICTs, is that of social network activity.
- Facebook’s popularity and the pull of creating a digital profile online is one of the most significant factors in getting users online in the Global South.
- The Facebook News Feed artificially reinforces a user’s confirmation bias by extending it from the user’s own mind to an algorithmic function.
- This negates the possibility for there to be a strong cognitive dissonance that may lead to the formation of new opinions, and thus an incalculation and calcification of a user’s political and social views.
- This leads to a much more combatant political landscape where opposing views do not seek a middle ground but rather fight for their own position against all others.
- If a state’s institutions and array of checks and balances cannot hold the different institutions against partisan views and strong ideological attempts to capture said institutions it will be difficult for the state to remain stable and execute political power for the sake of service provision.
- Fragile states that exist within the global south cannot afford to allow the social dysfunction that a breakdown in the dialectic may cause.
- It thus becomes important for the state to intervene in the causes of such dysfunction.

**THE RESEARCH**

1. Findings
   
   a. ICTs and access to social media are fast becoming one of the greatest sources of news in the global south.
   
   b. Access to Facebook through Freebasics and other avenues has made this social media platform of the most widely used.
   
   c. Facebook is one of the primary mechanism by which its users gain access to news.
   
   d. Facebook does not provide fair and balanced news, it provides what the algorithm believes its users want to see.
   
   e. This algorithm inculcates already existing cognitive bias.
   
   f. The algorithm Stops the ability for users to come into contact with cognitive dissonance.
   
   g. Fragile states are more susceptible to polarised polity.
Greater cognitive bias thus represents a greater threat in fragile global south states.

2. Recommendations:
   a. Adopt ICT policies that force social media sites that provide news media to provide a balanced and wide range of political, social and ideological views.
   b. Ensure that for any piece of content that a user views a piece of content from another point of view is available.
   c. Hold providers like Facebook to the same editorial standards as other news providers.
   d. Incentivise Facebook through advertising policy that either punishes the provider for the provision of biased news or allows only specific groups to advertise on the platform.
   e. Develop policies that allocates bandwidth to Facebook based on their news provider behaviour.
   f. Understand that this is a nuanced issue and one where one policy fits all may not work.

I THE NEWS FEED ALGORITHM EXPLAINED

Facebook as a social media site, made up of ordinary and unique users, works best by exposing its audience to news, posts and views that they agree with or could use for cognitively reinforcing previously held beliefs and opinions without exposing them to severe critique or new and relevant perspectives (Pariser 2011; DiFranzo & Gloria-Garci, 2017). Again, this is due to Facebook’s raison d'etre not being the provision of unbiased news, but the provision of what users want to see, (what they think would be most useful to them); as well as being the maximisation of time users spend on the platform and increasing exposure to advertising (Shih, 2009).

II CONFIRMATION BIAS AS A COGNITIVE COPING MECHANISM

There can be no dissonance and thus no change of opinion if the only information that the user is exposed to is information that they already agree with. In fact the steady stream of information reinforces the beliefs that the user already holds. In this way the Facebook news feed becomes a confirmation bias generating machine that ensures users will return to the stream that agrees with their opinions, which further entrenches said opinion and so on. The danger her lies not in the fact that confirmation bias exists but rather in the fact that the confirmation bias is not challenged. There is no scope for dissonance and thus no scope for an adjustment of opinion (Miller, 2016).

Figure 1. Content on Facebook is less ideologically diverse when it's shared by friends.

III Social and ideological extremes

A free press is not just about a removal of government interference in the way the media reports the news, but also allowing a plethora of voices to comment in their own way on the news and happenings within society (Borgesius et al., 2016). These multiple sources of information from the newsstand that we approach to gain the information we need as informed citizens without society. The newsstand operator doesn’t care what we consume at their stand. They care that we buy something but what we buy is immaterial to them. While we will likely choose those news sources that appeal to our already preconceived ideas of what is happening in our society we cannot help but be exposed to the other pieces at the newsstand. We may have gone to get our conservative paper or magazine, but we will see the liberal paper sharing equal space right alongside it. We may decide to have a read of what the other side is saying and while we may not agree with it suddenly the new...
information moves us a little closer to a synthesis between two opposing viewpoints

SOURCES


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