FREEDOM FROM SOCIAL ECHO CHAMBERS: POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF AN ALGORITHMIC BIAS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Presented by Peter Sleeman
Authored by Broc Rademan and Peter Sleeman
“THE FILTER BUBBLE TENDS TO DRAMATICALLY AMPLIFY CONFIRMATION BIAS—IN A WAY, IT’S DESIGNED TO... CONSUMING INFORMATION THAT CONFORMS TO OUR IDEAS OF THE WORLD IS EASY AND PLEASURABLE; CONSUMING INFORMATION THAT CHALLENGES US TO THINK IN NEW WAYS OR QUESTION OUR ASSUMPTIONS IS FRUSTRATING AND DIFFICULT...”

ELI PARISER – THE FILTER BUBBLE.

“IN FRAGILE SITUATIONS, TRUST IN STATE INSTITUTIONS AND AMONG PEOPLE TENDS TO BE WEAK. PEACEFULLY RESOLVING AND MANAGING CONFLICT AND (RE)BUILDING THE STATE REQUIRE AN INCREASINGLY INCLUSIVE POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, AND COMMITTED AND ABLE LEADERSHIP. IT ALSO REQUIRE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS THAT ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY AND PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL KEY GROUPS IN SOCIETY, INCLUDING THE MOST VULNERABLE AND MARGINALIZED. AN ENGAGED PUBLIC AND CIVIL SOCIETY, WHICH CONSTRUCTIVELY MONITORS DECISION-MAKING, IS IMPORTANT TO ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY. CONFLICT LEGACIES AND THE RISK OF FUTURE TENSIONS MAKE IT CRITICAL TO BUILD CAPACITIES FOR RECONCILIATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION AT ALL LEVELS”

MTHULI NCUBE AND BASIL JONES - DRIVERS AND DYNAMICS OF FRAGILITY IN AFRICA
GROWTH OF ACCESS TO ICT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- ICTs have a strong economic multiplier effect, and have significant knock-on effects for economic development (Baliamoune-Lutz, 2003; Khuong, 2011, Sassi and Goaied, 2013; Jin and Cho, 2015).
- In the Global South much of this ICT access is via mobile smartphones.
- Social Network activity, particularly Facebook, creates especially high demand for ICTs.
- Facebook’s popularity is one of the most significant factors in getting users online in the Global South (Dow, Adamic & Friggeri, 2013).
- Facebook has launched a zero-rated platform called FreeBasics that does not consume the user’s mobile data.
- Facebook and the digital news posts promulgated by its users, and thus and the News Feed algorithm, have become the primary source of news for people with access to them.
- This trend is unlikely to reverse soon.

Facebook penetration in Middle East and Africa from 2012 to 2018
FACEBOOK AND THE NEWSFEED ALGORITHM

- Facebook’s algorithm constantly collects data from user’s activities to determine each individual’s interests based on:
  - what they look at
  - how long they look at it
  - comment on, share and like it (Dow, Adamic & Friggeri, 2013).

- Algorithmic techniques of prioritising certain news and posts are used to hide other posts so that that news and opinions more agreeable, or “engage-worthy”, take precedence without allowing users a chance to view all information on offer, leading to lower “crossover” posting as seen in Figure 1 (Pariser, 2011).

- Using analytics to determine customised preferences for the sake of extending advertisement viewing time is similar to not being allowed to look at other journals at a newsstand simply because one has not considered them in the past.

- There might at times be a variable to adjust the “sameness” of News Feed posts through randomisation, the News Feed however, works best by exposing its audience to news, posts and views that they agree with or could use for cognitively reinforcing beliefs and opinions without exposing them to severe critique or new and relevant perspectives, due to Facebook Raison d’etre (Pariser 2011; DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcí, 2017).

![Figure 1: Rate of “crossover” posting between liberal and conservative ideologies](image-url)
NATURAL CONFIRMATION BIAS AND COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

• The human brain utilises heuristic processes in order to process information. Heuristics are processes developed by the human brain to short-cut lengthy decision-making processes, such as deciding whether or not to eat one type of berry over another. This saves time and maximises survivability.

• If one piece of information is considered to be true then it is likely that a similar piece of information is also likely to be true.

• We will trust and seek out information that agrees with our preconceived ideas about the colour of food as this information is likely to maximise our survival. Thus, the heuristic of confirmation bias is born (Metzgar, 2013).

• If we are confronted by information that does differ we attempt to reject it. Our brain however has a defence against this. If this information holds up to scrutiny this may cause what psychologist have called cognitive dissonance (Vraga, 2011).

• Eventually the new truth will be accepted, maybe not by the singular person but through the acceptance of the society. In this way society is protected by world changing information that may disrupt the society, but it also allows for progress to be made when the circumstances of survivability are changing.

• Human beings have directional goals. We engage in motivated reasoning that colour our input of information to suit our pre-existing goals and attitudes. We spend far more time scrutinising information that is incongruent with our currently held views and accept information that agrees with it (Miller, 2016).

• What is important here is that each time a person takes on a new piece of information they enter into a discourse with it. While refuting a new piece of information, it is likely that the information will have an effect on the person refuting it (Miller, 2016).

• The new information will slowly tweak the users point of view and slowly but surely change their position (Miller, 2016). This process is known as a dialectic process which will be discussed in depth in the next section.
FACEBOOK CONFIRMATION BIAS AND THE CALCIFICATION OF POLITICAL OPINION

- The Facebook algorithm ensures that users are fed a steady stream of data that agrees with their held beliefs. The process of confirmation bias is taken out of the hand of the individual and actively reinforced by the News Feed (Vraga, 2011, Miller, 2016; Goldsborough, 2017).
- 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 Hegel’s historical dialectic, history is the product of the contest for recognition by whichever section of society that feels that its human freedoms and therefore social justice are being denied by a master class (Fukuyama, 1992).
- This dialogue requires a well-informed population who are not only able to communicate effectively with other members of the population but also able to understand the nuances of both theirs and others positions.
- The fact that traditional media has a certain bias should cause little controversy. The philosophies of linguistics as well as hermeneutics demonstrate how one can never separate ones of preconceptions and prejudices from what one reads or writes (Boronat, 2015).
- Our views become calcified when the newsstand only reflects what we already believe. If the newsstand analysis us and reconfigures itself and reconfigures its items to reflect the items we read and liked in previous visits then it would be fair for us to assume that these pieces represent a true thesis. Why would we consider opposing viewpoints if we are never exposed to them? When we do hear opposing views they are all too easy to dismiss as friend ideas that are not worthy of our consideration (Bozdag et al., 2014).
POLARIZED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND ROLE OF THE STATE

• The current confirmation bias that the Facebook News Feed creates leads to a stymieing of this conversation allows for extreme viewpoints to gain a large political platform that they would not otherwise have had (Goldsborough, 2017, Shih, 2009).

• This type of thinking can have serious political ramifications e.g. in the recent far right swings that have occurred in The United States of America with the election of Donald Trump (Fuchsman, 2017).

• It is not only the developed world that faces these issues but the Global South too. South Africa for example may find the supporters of leaders such as Julius Malema or the Far right Nationalists becoming more and more extreme in their views as those said views get reflected back to them over and over again.

• In democratic states there is now a mechanism for developing a thesis does not require violent revolution or the deconstruction of the state. Through democratic elections populations vote for those candidates that best represent their views (Fukuyama, 1992).

• Through constant consumption of views and ideas these views may change and warp, in a well-functioning democratic systems this leads to a mix of candidates that reflect a synthesis of the thesis as well as the antithesis (Bozdag and Hoven, 2015).

• The role of the state is the provision of this information.
WHY FRAGILE STATES AND STATE CAPTURE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

• The answer to this lies in the fact that global south states tend to be fragile in nature.
• A fragile region or state has weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society. Fragile states are also more vulnerable to internal and external shocks such as economic crises or natural disasters. More resilient states exhibit the capacity and legitimacy of governing a population and its territory. They can manage and adapt to changing social needs and expectations, shifts in elite and other political agreements, and growing institutional complexity. Fragility and resilience should be seen as shifting points along a spectrum. Source: OECD 2013
• States with stable checks and balances, stable democratic processes and robust media traditions are able to absorb, to a certain extent, the negative problems that a polarised electorate can cause.
• In fragile states the social dialectic that takes place is of the utmost importance.
• These governments of these states find it difficult to provide the basics of what lies within the scope of administration (Davies, 2011).
• These social issues require a robust social dialogue for citizens to be able to select the representatives that will best serve their interests and have the capabilities to provide basic political services.
• The drivers of state fragility are many and varied ranging from neo-colonials, corruption, a lack of skills and economic stagnation.
• Important to note that one of the ways that state fragility can be mitigated is through a well-informed populace with access to avenues of debate (Brinkerhoff, 2014).
• If the calcification of pre-existing political prejudices is allowed to continue within these fragile states the social dialectic that leads to the formation of a stronger and progressive, these states are unlikely to be able to absorb the issues that this confirmation and calcification causes.
• In short the electronic newsstands within these countries must be free to show the widest range of news and information to global south citizens.
• A polarised legislature is the last thing that a fragile state needs.
POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE ALGORITHMIC BIAS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

• 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.
• In fragile states this can have frightening implications. 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.
• It is the suggestion of this paper that states adopt a policy position that forces organisation like Facebook that control News Feed algorithms to show a wide range of political, social and ideological views.
• This could be done by a slight adjustment to the logic of the algorithm. If a user likes a specific article that shares a specific ideological position it should be the role of the algorithm to not only show more of this type of content but to also show items that may have a position on the other side of the discourses spectrum.
• This of course would require Facebook to start to take its role as a provider of news seriously and began to edit and collate its news items seriously. This structure of an editorial team would also allow for the removal of news considered “Fake”.
• Facebook relies on advertising revenue to grow and continue to provide services. States in the global south often have a high degree of control of their telecommunications infrastructure, thus it should be fairly easy to incentives services like Facebook with greater bandwidth allocation or a decrease in data usage to spread their services to a greater number.
• If a more punitive policy is necessary it would also be possible to suppress said bandwidth. The other option from an advertising standpoint is to disallow advertises to do so on Facebook. This would dry up the source of revenue that Facebook relies on and thus force the company to agree to the terms of the policy.
• Funding NGO that provide greater information.
CONCLUDING REMARKS, FINAL REMARKS AND NEED FOR FURTHER WORK

• It is of course understood here that such policies are far from simple and require further research and understanding.
• This paper’s role however was to acknowledge that there is a need for such a policy. The ways in which the policy outcomes could be reached are myriad.
• Any policy would require large scale consultation with the ICT sector as well as Facebook itself.
• There also needs to be greater research into the relationship between social media and the formation of ideological extremes.
• Further studies on the ground are necessarily to determine the exact relationship between the societies in the global south and these echo chambers.
• These studies must also take into account the local, gendered and historical context.
• There must be constant assessment of the spectrum of information being supplied on Facebook and Social Media.
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