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Social media and the future of open debate: A user-oriented approach to Facebook's filter bubble conundrum

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a two-year project, *Creating Facebook*, this article explores how the actions and agency of Facebook users contribute to the distortion of information and polarisation of socio-political opinion. Facebook's influence as a channel for the circulation of news has come under intense scrutiny recently, especially with regard to the dissemination of false stories. While this criticism has focused on the 'filter bubbles' created by the site's personalisation algorithms, our research indicates that users' own actions also play a key role in how the site operates as a forum for debate. Our findings show that the strategies people use to navigate the complex social space contribute to the polarising of debate, as they seek to avoid conflict with the diverse members of their network.

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1. Introduction

This article examines data collected as part of a two-year project, *Creating Facebook*, to argue that users' online actions contribute to the creation of a filter bubble effect and to put forward user-oriented suggestions for addressing this problem as it impacts on the use of the platform as a site for discussion of ideas and opinions. *Creating Facebook*, which explored user perspectives on the suitability of Facebook as a forum for open debate, reveals how the communicative strategies that people employ on the site influence their exposure to and engagement with a diversity of opinion and conflicting worldviews. The concept of the online filter bubble (Pariser, 2011) – the way that personalisation algorithms used in site architectures foreground material that will be of particular interest to individual users while suppressing stories which may diverge from or challenge their views – has emerged in recent years as an apparent challenge for contemporary society. The socio-political implications of the phenomenon, it is argued, include the polarisation of debate and the spread of false and highly-partisan information (e.g. Solon, 2016), including so-called 'fake news'. While algorithms are certainly an important element in the spread of false or fabricated reports about events in the world, we argue in this article that they are only one side of the story. Of equal importance is what people themselves do, how they fashion their experience of Facebook as a communicative space through their actions, and how, in effect, they contribute to the

construction of these opinion-ghettos themselves, creating the conditions in which fabricated and partisan news can more easily be disseminated.

The research project which informs our argument, *Creating Facebook*, examined people's reflections on their communication via Facebook, with a particular focus on what they considered suitable behaviour on the site, and how they regulated their own interactions in response to their emergent beliefs about appropriate behavioural norms. The data is comprised of the questionnaire responses of over a hundred Facebook users about their experiences of and beliefs about personal communication on the site (i.e. user-shared status updates), as well as in-depth follow-up interviews with selected participants. The analysis explores the way that communication of this sort on Facebook apparently gives rise to recurrent examples of conflict, disagreement, or a sense of frustration with other interactants, which, we argue, is in part a result of the specific form of diversity which exists on the site. We refer to this as *intradiversity*, and suggest that it results from the type of 'ego-centred' network (Androutsopoulos, 2014, p. 63) that Facebook facilitates, whereby communication is predominantly structured around the personal connections of individual users as these are accrued across that user's biography.

Key to our reasoning for the importance of intradiversity and the way it influences users' actions is our concept of *context design*, which we put forward as an important theoretical model for understanding online communication. Context design, which builds on the concept of audience design (Bell, 1984) as well as models concerning the interactive construction of context (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992), illuminates the ways in which

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Facebook users imagine and respond to a complex set of contextual variables as they design the style and content of their interactions. In combination with intradiversity, context design offers a refinement and enhancement of the widely-used notion of context collapse which has been highly influential in social science research (Marwick and Boyd, 2014), and helps to explain the significance of user practices within the broader debate about the influence of filter bubbles in online civic discourse.

2. Filter bubbles and their impact on civic discourse

Facebook continues to dominate the global social media landscape and has emerged as an important outlet for the sharing and consuming of news (as well as discussion around it), with the Pew Research Center reporting that two-thirds of Facebook users in the United States – or 44% of the general population (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016) – say they get news from the site. Given its reach, concern has been voiced about the way in which the type of dialogue needed for balanced and informed public opinion-forming is poorly served by the site (Benton, 2016). This was particularly considered the case in the aftermath of the rise of the populist movements which led to the Brexit (Viner, 2016) and Trump (Solon, 2016) victories. The argument voiced in some quarters following the Trump victory (e.g. El-Bermawy, 2016) is that polarisation, in addition to misinformation, is causing a break-down in civic discourse. Furthermore, the polarised nature of debate prevents misinformation from being challenged, thus letting its malignant influence spread (Read, 2016).

The term ‘filter bubble’ was coined by Pariser (2011) to refer to the concept that a website’s personalisation algorithm selectively predicts the information that users will find of most interest based on data about each individual – including signals such as their history of Likes, search history, and other past online behaviour – and that this creates a form of online isolation from a diversity of opinions. The concept, which focuses specifically on the implications of algorithmic personalisation, is a complement to research examining the way that people choose to read articles that predominantly align with their political opinions, and tend to share and discuss these with their social groups, thus creating ‘echo chambers’ of opinion (Garrett, 2009). In the days before algorithmic personalisation became commonplace, Sunstein (2007) argued that online communities resulted in people cutting themselves off from opinion and information that challenged their belief systems, and that this was likely to have a negative impact on democratic debate. The development of algorithms, however, has led to a new situation in which people’s actions are increasingly shaped by processes which are hidden to most users (Jones, 2015).

On Facebook, the personalisation algorithm is designed to provide an experience for users which prioritises information which is most ‘meaningful’ to them (Zuckerberg, 2016). Although this applies to all information that is shared on Facebook, it also includes opinions and expressions about social or political values as well as news stories, which, so the argument goes, results in a newsfeed filled predominantly with opinions with which the user agrees – a phenomenon which Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 126) refer to as the ‘ghetto-ization’ of the internet. The significance of this, according to Pariser (2011, p. 5), is that ‘[d]emocracy requires a reliance on shared facts: instead we’re being offered parallel but separate universes’. Pariser’s warning relates to the way that civic debate is not best served by intellectual segregation, and leads more readily to extremism than to consensus. Research shows that when people discuss issues with those who share their opinion, this leads to more polarized attitudes towards the topic (Stinchcombe, 2010), whereas exposure to diversity increases people’s tolerance for those with different or opposing views (Garrett and Resnick, 2011).

It is worth pointing out that other studies have suggested a different phenomenon, whereby the extensiveness of online networks means that a small but significant fraction of ties are with people with different political outlooks, which increases exposure to different opinions (Sharad et al., 2010). Flaxman et al. (2016, pp. 20–21), in their study of online news consumption, arrive at the conclusion that both the above phenomena seem to occur. Their research points to an apparent paradox that, although users are pushed towards ‘ideological segregation’ in terms of the information they consume, this is not necessarily linked to a lack of contact with people who hold divergent views. As we shall show, our user-oriented focus goes some way to explaining this apparent contradiction by pointing to the interplay between user actions and the algorithm.

The way the discourse over the influence of Facebook’s filter bubble ‘problem’ was framed in the media in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election had a distinct element of technological determinism to it, at least in headlines which suggest, for example, that ‘Donald Trump Won Because of Facebook’ (Read, 2016). In line with the view that the solution to the filter bubble conundrum lies with the technology, numerous attempts have been made to develop software which enhance open dialogue and create an environment of open-mindedness (Bozdog & van den Hoven, 2015). In December 2016 Facebook announced a set of measures to tackle the problem themselves, including getting readers to flag stories for fact-checking, marking dubious stories as being ‘disputed’ and dropping them down the newsfeed (Facebook, 2016a).

What these solutions neglect, however, is the role that users’ actions may play in generating the effects popularly put down to the algorithm. In his discussion of digital surveillance, Jones (2015) explores how social media communication increasingly involves users interacting with computer code (that is, algorithms) as well as with the actions and utterances of other users – a phenomenon he refers to as ‘algorithmic pragmatics’. In communicative environments like Facebook, users tend to interpret and respond to the computer code as they would in interaction with other users, inferring the underlying intentions and shaping their subsequent actions in line with and in anticipation of the algorithm’s response. Jones’s argument points to the way in which filter bubbles are created not only through the actions implemented through the algorithm, but through the interactions that take place between the algorithm and the site users.

A less technological determinist position to tackling the issue would therefore be that, with enhanced awareness of the affordances of the technology, people would be better able to navigate them and respond to any influence the technology does produce. The concept of affordances (i.e. the set of functional opportunities offered to a user by a platform) is useful here in foregrounding the role that user responses to technology have in shaping user experience. An important element of this relationship between platform and user is the way people perceive the functionalities, and the extent to which they are aware of the range of possibilities available to them and how these work. Affordances therefore emerge from the interaction that users have with the technology and their critical awareness. As we discuss below, the beliefs that people have about a technology have a bearing on what they do with it, and are thus a vital element in how a particular platform is used as a communicative resource. In other words, affordances are a product not simply of the design of the technology, but people’s cultural judgements about it as well as their awareness of its complex and shifting functionalities (Facebook, for example, is prone to update its software on a very frequent basis).

Returning to the issue of the filter bubble and its role in the spread of fake news, the appeal of an explanation that focuses almost exclusively on the technology is easy to understand, as

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