

Policy 360 -Episode 58- What Do Facebook's New Algorithms Really Mean? - Transcript

Kelly Brownell: Hello and welcome to "Policy 360." I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Huge news from Facebook recently. They're tweaking their service behind the scenes changing their algorithms a bit. Now, what I just said seems contradictory. Huge news, but they're just tweaking? How does this all play out? Well this means that your News Feed might look a little different. You might see more posts from your friends and less from publishers or businesses. These algorithms that determine what we see on social media platforms like Facebook wield a lot of power. It's not just power over what we see. Smart algorithms are beginning to actually generate news stories. Even some legitimate online news stories are not written by humans. They're being written by smart algorithms. You've heard me right. Real stories are written by computer programs.

Phil Napoli is here to sort all of this out. Phil was recently awarded a prestigious fellowship by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to explore this topic more closely. Welcome Phil.

Phil Napoli: Thanks for having me.

Kelly Brownell: First, what do you mean when you talk about social media algorithms?

Phil Napoli: The context of social media we're focusing on are the code essentially that filters our content for us. That makes the determinations as to what is showing up in our News Feed and what is not. There are even some folks today who still aren't aware of the extent to which our News Feeds are filtered. A lot of these platforms there are points not even that far in the past where they made that decision that it's not going to be chronological, that it would be curated, that it would be filtered on the basis of criteria related to our previous behavior patterns. What types of stories were we clicking on? What types of stories were we liking? What types of stories were we sharing? What types of stories were the people in our social network reacting to in all these different ways? All that becomes a treasure trove a data that can be analyzed to determine what we do and do not see in our News Feeds.

Kelly Brownell: The fact that algorithms affect what we see on social media, the fact that it occurs, has now been established. Is it a problem?

Phil Napoli: The data, the research, at that point, you have some support on both sides. There's a fairly substantial body of research that is showing, if we consider the notion of the filter bubble to be a problem, this idea that indeed the reliance on personalization system does it indeed point us to more homogenous content that tends to reinforce our existing beliefs and ideological perspectives, yes. Now, at the same time, there's been some research that's shown that that doesn't always happen. Does it though tend to increase the likelihood that we are actually exposed to falsity? There is some evidence of that, because,

unfortunately, there is a fairly consistent relationship between partisanship as it relates to news and falsity. That your more partisan news sites on both sides of political spectrum exhibit a greater likelihood of disseminating false information. As long as that linkage exists, there is this concern that this process does increase our likelihood of being exposed to false information and decreases our likelihood of being exposed to the accurate information that might refute the false information.

Kelly Brownell: The first generation of this, as I recall, was the algorithms would try to predict what I might be interested in and what I might now. If I'm not interested in golf, for example, I wouldn't get golf stories. If I am interested in the US Senate, I would get stories about the US Senate. That seems fairly benign and potentially pretty helpful. You're talking to us about something way beyond that?

Phil Napoli: Sure, because the examples you've given, story type, is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the nature of the data now that are feeding into the outputs of the algorithm on the News Feed. Facebook's original algorithm for its News Feed was very simple. Very few inputs. It now has literally hundreds of data points that feed into it and determine. Issues of the political orientation of the content, the nature of the sources, again, the nature of the behaviors of other folks in your network. There're so many variables that are being taken into account that, yes, if it were as simple as more politics stories, less golf stories, et cetera, but it's a lot more complicated than that and allows for a lot more nuances in terms of what gets through and what doesn't.

Kelly Brownell: What does this news from Facebook mean?

Phil Napoli: Well, it means a couple of things. One, it means that they would like to be a less prominent source of news for people, I think, than they have become. What was interesting was a few days after the announcement about diminishing the role of brands in news outlets in the news feed, they also announced another new program that was going to put users in a position of evaluating the trustworthiness of individual news sources. Those evaluations would become a determining factor in the algorithm that places news in your News Feed. They really are approaching the issue of how they operate as a distributor of news from a few different and seem to really be trying to reconfigure the dynamics of how they present news to us.

Kelly Brownell: What do you think this all means for policy?

Phil Napoli: That is a really good question. I tend to use the term in this context governance, because I don't think this is the kind of subject we want government alone, government agencies, dealing with. It would be a very interesting political climate, obviously now, if we had a federal agency that was tasked with policing the activities of social media platforms and dissemination of news. What I really imagine at least or advocate is a real multi-stakeholder approach where we have not only users being involved in some ways perhaps, but also the platforms themselves and perhaps creating a much more robust self-regulatory apparatus

where they in fact perhaps vet their algorithms according to particular public interest values that have not really be part of how these algorithms work so far, and that there are more stakeholders, perhaps even news media involved in that and academic researchers involved in that. That the whole process becomes more participatory.

Kelly Brownell: We mentioned earlier that these computer algorithms can actually write stories. Tell us about that.

Phil Napoli: Yes. If you read a college sports story for not a major sport or if you read an earnings report story, these days the odds are that that story was written by an algorithm. Stories that can essentially take a set of data and, based on parameters that have been established, other types of stories that have been input, it essentially learns and knows how to operate within the conventions of a news story. It can produce a summary of a baseball game on the basis of the box scores. It can produce earnings reports stories on the basis on the statistics in those reports. Those tend to be the primary areas where this is happening, but the companies that do this kind of work also have expressed some ambitions to see the nature of this sort of algorithmically generated news reporting expand.

Kelly Brownell: Can we tell the difference if a story is written by a computer program?

Phil Napoli: You know what's interesting is that the studies that have been done on that have found, generally, no. There might be some subtle ways where we rate a story slightly different, but in terms of our being able to, a, identify which one was or was not written absolutely not. Then, on a lot of qualitative indicators of you might assess the overall quality of a story, they perform pretty well.

Kelly Brownell: Do you see a connection between the news algorithms and the election of Donald Trump or just modern elections at all?

Phil Napoli: Yeah. I think each election seems to bring with it a fairly substantial change in the techniques and technologies of communicating to voters. This time around it was not only the prominence of social media as a mechanism by which voters got news, but it also became prominent as a means by which political campaigns, legitimate political campaigns and as we now know foreign propaganda campaigns, could deliver messages, advertisements, to reach voters. Those advertisements can sometimes really take the form of, or at least superficially, the form of news stories.

That line between advertising and journalism seem to get blurred in this past election cycle, and a lot of that goes to the fact that, when you are consuming your news on social media, you often ... Because, again, it is just this undifferentiated flow, and your crazy Uncle Tom could be the first thing you see. Then what looks like a news source could be the second thing you see. We're not always, in fact, almost half the time people, when they share a story, didn't

even click through and read it. We see the little blurb, and that might be all we consume. The nature of how we're getting the news makes us a bit more susceptible to misinformation. Those of us who do research in this area, we're starting to see the studies come out now. We're really trying to, as much as possible, sort out the magnitude, if any, of the impact, but nobody's really been able to put a number on this yet.

We know numbers on the exposure side. We know that, even according to Facebook when they were testifying before congress in October, 126 million of their users were exposed to Russian developed and sponsored, targeted ads that generally were filled with misinformation.

Kelly Brownell: Do you think people care? The reason I ask is that there's a lot of information out there saying that people seek out news that confirms their belief. If it's made up by an algorithm or a foreign government, it still confirms people's beliefs. Do you think that they care where it comes from?

Phil Napoli: I think some do, and I think some don't. I think that's sort of the irony of where we are not is that the way our media ecosystem has advanced that we can look back at a simpler time when there weren't as many choices and there wasn't as much personalization and actually think that in many ways that less sophisticated system was protecting some of us from our own worst impulses, which is discouraging.

Kelly Brownell: It seems like if you believe in transparency and truth that people would need to know where their news comes from. If it comes from some nefarious source, then they deserve to know. Then they can choose to attend to it or not, but at least they'd know. That's why this work that you're doing seems so important, so I wish you the best of luck with it going forward. It looks like it's an incredibly rapidly changing landscape.

Phil Napoli: Yeah. It's tough to keep pace with, that's for sure.

Kelly Brownell: I bet as the technology changes almost by the day the number of new variants of the kind of thing you talked about just become enormous.

Phil Napoli: Yes.

Kelly Brownell: Good luck. My guest today has been Phil Napoli. Phil is a James R. Shepley Professor of Public Policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University where he is also an affiliate of the school's DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy. Phil is currently at work on his next book called "Media Technocracy: The Rise of Algorithmic News and the Future of the Marketplace of Ideas." Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.