

Facebook's Trending Topics Controversy and the Users' Reaction
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This short essay will first tell the story behind Trending Topics controversy and discuss the implications of the underlying algorithm. Secondly I will look at some the users' comments on news articles about the topic to emulate their general reaction and further dissect the matter, including my own opinions.

1) The Facebook Trending Topics Controversy

Facebook's Trending Topics is a tool for desktop users in the right-top of their Facebook feeds which shows the most discussed topics of the moment. Or does it?

In January of 2014 Facebook launched their version of Trending Topics, entering Twitter's territory. The intricacies of the algorithm however, go far beyond what meets the eye. While Facebook did note the following: "[...] The list of Trending Topics is then personalized for each user via an algorithm that relies on a number of factors, including the importance of the topic, Pages a person has liked, location (e.g. home state sports news)" [1] the process and alteration turned out to be much more complex.

The first criticism about what was perceived to be just an algorithm arose in the summer of 2014 when Facebook featured the Ice Bucket Challenge over the civil unrest in Ferguson Missouri. A couple minor incidents followed but none caught the mass media's attention. However, in May of 2016, Gizmodo published a series of articles, featuring a number of shocking claims backed by former Facebook employees. The articles revealed that the contractors employed by Facebook, internally referred to as 'news curators' were instructed to manually inject stories which were not organically put together by the algorithm and backed by numbers, as well as the suppression of conservative media and exclusion of news about Facebook itself. As Michael Nunez, the technology editor at Gawker who published the original article put it: "In other words, Facebook's news section operates like a traditional newsroom, reflecting the biases of its workers and the institutional imperatives of the corporation." [2] which would not necessarily be an outrageous thing had Facebook not given their users the impression that the trending section is a perfectly unbiased mathematically created list.

Many other major news organizations followed up on the story and other details started appearing about Facebook's interworking. According to the Guardian, three former Facebook editors said they had indeed inserted stories that were not visible to users into the trending feed in order to make the experience more topical [3].

The bad press in the media and the amount of accusations caught the attention of US Senate commerce committee chair John Thune who asked and even started a congressional inquiry on the matter. That inquiry ended in virtually nothing and of course many would argue that legal methods are not the best frameworks for

resolving moral dilemmas but it does show the how wide the controversy has reached.

The combination of these events led to Facebook issuing a number of press releases, explanations and clarifications. After an alleged internal investigation, Facebook had the following to share: “Our investigation has revealed no evidence of systematic political bias in the selection or prominence of stories included in the Trending Topics feature. Our data analysis indicated that conservative and liberal topics are approved as trending topics at virtually identical rates.” [4]

But while the political bias aspect was slowly being accepted as “debunked” in the general media, enough other details about Facebook’s algorithm had arose by that point to analyze and draw a number of conclusions. An internal 21-page internal Facebook guide has leaked showing guidelines for the content ‘curators,’ and the conclusions one can draw from this document are best summarized in The Guardian: “The guidelines show human intervention – and therefore editorial decisions – at almost every stage of Facebook’s trending news operation” [3] Further points of concern include artificially “injecting” stories of importance which somehow the algorithm overlooked, “blacklisting” stories which do not portray a real-life event, decision which is left at the discretion of the curator and checking stories against a list of 10 chosen news websites to see if they are redeemed as having “editorial authority.”

While there is no evidence that Facebook showed political bias as originally claimed in the Gizmodo article, the other findings of the press in this scandal are much more somber. Facebook has without question become the largest news distributor on the planet. 1,6 billion people access Facebook monthly and a good portion of this number uses this platform as a starting point for their consumption of news-media. Facebook’s editorial strategy is definitely no more and perhaps much less biased than any other news organization out there, however they do not sell themselves as a news organization. They give the impression, with their simple design and keywords like “Trending Topics” that these stories are chosen completely automatically with an empirical program that counts the hashtags and the number of shares of every topic and displays them in descending order. But that is not the reality of things, and one would expect the users, the real people who use that feature to have a reaction.

2) The user’s reaction

I started writing this paper thinking that my research would lead to a conclusive reaction of the public that I could analyze. This paper was going to compare methods and examples of accountability for algorithms from both a legal and a public standpoint. However, I was shocked to find that there was no outrage, no consequences, no closure on this matter; unless changing the official company terminology from ‘black-list’ to ‘revisit’ and ‘injection’ to ‘correction’ is considered closure. [5]

For the mass-media this was a big topic. It was covered by most major newspapers and all technology outlets. The majority of the community, however and to my surprise seemed not to care. On the other hand, the few that did engage the conversation left a multitude of comments which I categorize, treat as a minimal but significant sample and expand on with theory from the critical algorithm class.

RodTorfulson'sArmada 5/09/16 9:24am [2]

As unpopular as this opinion may be, I don't want facebook or buzzfeed or other social sites to be journalistically unbiased. They are NOT NEWS. they are NOT JOURNALISTS. They are corporate citizens and as corporate citizens they have a responsibility to take a stand (any stand) and help fight for it.

CodexGigas 5/09/16 10:52am

FB is privately owned, not a news outlet, and therefore under no compulsion to behave like an unbiased news service.

Response:

From these users' perspective Facebook should be allowed to curate the news they feature as they are not government-run or a news institution.

The problem however is that Facebook did not make it clear that there was a human-touch to their algorithm. Before the scandal, it was actually not known that people intervened and altered their trending topics list.

This problem can be extended to most algorithms of public interest, namely when looking at transparency. It is already as difficult as it is to read and interpret code, but when these algorithms are further hidden behind corporate interests and walls of intellectual property, that task becomes virtually impossible. It can indeed be argued that what Facebook did was morally ok, but to sell it as something else, is definitely not.

sui_generis 5/09/16 4:24pm

Seems like a case like this would be much more believably made with actual hard data, rather than just anecdotal assertions, which are just as subject to bias as the curation they're complaining about.

Response:

This is a very good point which leads to the topic of Methods for analyzing algorithms. Unfortunately, we do not have access either to the actual algorithm, nor to the raw data the algorithm uses to count for ourselves. This is what makes talking about algorithms so difficult; the fact that the people know so little.

p51d007 5/12/16 8:44pm [6]

I don't care what they do on their website. It's THEIR website, they can promote/not promote whatever they want. Don't like it, don't go there. I'm conservative, but I don't give a crap. It's THEIR website.

Response:

It is very simple to say 'You don't like it? Then don't use it' but the reality is much more complex. As I see it, there are two main arguments to be made. Firstly, by this logic, we would never engage in constructive discussions; just because a situation is

the way it is, it does not mean that we should not try to change it or try to aim for some accountability. This is in essence, the reason why there was almost no criticism from the actual users; they understood the situation, and accepted it. Secondly, leaving the platform is not that simple. When all of your friends and family are there, when that's the place millions of lines of your conversations and hundreds of photos are stored, leaving is not really an option. This situation leads to the discussion of free-choice, and whether one really has it on today's internet.

FrenchScouse 12 May 2016 19:26 [3]

I would not trust algorithms for trending news: it opens the door for fake news and rumours to reach the top with some possibly nasty consequences.

Response:

This is representative of a number reactions out there. The making public of the people behind the algorithm, actually seemed to give some a sense of security. It is clear that many still do not trust such invisible processes; but they do trust invisible people.

3) Conclusion

The first and most obvious point to be made, which arose from the lack of civil engagement is that the users either don't care about or don't understand the implications of these recent findings.

I believe this case study is a perfect example of an algorithm of public impact and its hidden sides in the current online environment. One can analyze bias, transparency, accountability, but above all, the public reaction, or lack thereof. The few that did engage in the conversation however, had many interesting points of view to share; it is nevertheless clear that they only scratch the surface of the topic. I conclude that with more insight into algorithmic culture and literature, the conversation and the reaction of the public would have gone more in depth and most likely had more impact.

Sources:

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/12/facebook-trending-news-leaked-documents-editor-guidelines>

[2] <http://gizmodo.com/former-facebook-workers-we-routinely-suppressed-conser-1775461006>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/12/facebook-trending-news-leaked-documents-editor-guidelines>

[4] <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2016/05/response-to-chairman-john-thunes-letter-on-trending-topics/>

[5] <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2016/05/information-about-trending-topics/>

[6] <http://gizmodo.com/facebook-admits-its-trending-section-includes-topics-no-1776319308>