

Social Networks

What role did social networks play in the Christchurch massacre?

Abstract: The Internet once represented an advancement in global democracy where the opportunity to share knowledge was no longer bound by limitations of personal experience. Instead, we have been siloed into our preconceived biases and ideology while social network algorithms create echo chambers that can result in extremist behaviors. A consideration of social medias role and responsibility in the Christchurch massacre.

The advances of Web 2.0 and subsequent development of Social Network Sites (SNS's) such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram had potential to be an active tool in advancement of global democracy and an opportunity for international unification. The new medium could play host to diverse ideas and access would not be bound by the constraints of time, social status or geographic location. Politics has embraced SNSs, primarily social media as a communication tool, where everyday citizens are now able to locate information, receive and disseminate news, and mobilise citizens quickly for a cause (Hyun and Kim, 2015). Despite SNS's inclusive format, paradoxically they do not lend themselves to democracy and instead reinforce partisan politics and are a breeding ground for extremism. In this conference paper, I argue that SNS platforms foster an environment of echo chambers that promote political and ideological polarisation, undermine democracy and facilitate extremism.

News Consumption and Dissemination

“Social Media do not show you the world out there, they construct a world to your liking, and as such, they are a breeding ground for echo chambers, and constructions of filter bubbles where all like-minded people get together and reinforce their perception of the realities and priorities rather than engaging with other views. And, everybody assumes this is the world out there!” Dr Majid Khosravini

Unlike other web-based platforms such as email and message boards, social media sites bring together the personal and the political (Yu, 2016). Interactions happen in real time, simulating face to face conversation within established relationships and networks. While most direct political discourse is initiated by individuals that are active participants in the political sphere, passive news consumption and purposeful dissemination of information is the more prominent political based activity of most users participating with SNSs (Hyun and Kim, 2015). Political action is rarely an individual's primary reason for using social media, but instead a by-product of interacting with current affairs and incidental opinions on the platforms. No longer limited to the role of consumer, users of SNS's are now able to create news and share and link news items within their networks. This new form of mass media has usurped the role of gate-keeper from the traditional mainstream media and utilises its networking capabilities through established trust between participants (Hyun and Kim, 2015).

Passive news consumption is initiated within social media feeds once a user consciously begins a relationship with a preferred news outlet or journalist by liking or following their page or profile, creating a continuous newsfeed and updates, similar to the act of purchasing or consuming news from traditional outlets of personal choice. Purposeful dissemination of this news is akin to sharing something that you read in the paper or viewed on the nightly news bulletin (Hyun and Kim, 2015), however rather than the limitations of sharing news face to face with individuals, sharing on an SNS grants exposure to a much

larger audience with the potential for viral publicity. This virality has previously worked for democracy in the case of Arab Spring, fundraising for KONY 2012, education in #blacklivesmatter and awareness in #metoo movements. However, on March 15, 2019, this virality was utilised to disseminate extreme right wing propaganda via a live stream video of a massacre in Christchurch New Zealand, accompanied by a manifesto of extremist ideology by an individual that was possibly radicalised by the very same platforms.

Algorithms, Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

Particularly evidenced within Facebook and YouTube, an individual's consumption and dissemination of news contributes data to their personal algorithm which in turn anticipates what the user would like to see next. This algorithm continues to dictate what information is made available to the user to create the optimal experience each time they log in. Based on the data supplied, SNS algorithms not only curate pleasing content for the user but also regulate exposure to opposing views in newsfeeds to create a custom experience for the user free of differing ideology. This action mimics human behaviour where individuals will also tend to consume media that supports their preconceived belief system. Known as selective exposure or confirmation bias, studies into this phenomenon when displayed on social media have shown that "compared with algorithmic ranking, individuals' choices played a stronger role in limiting exposure to cross-cutting content" (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015) and that moderates were more likely to be susceptible to this type of behaviour (Spohr, 2017). One issue with selective exposure is that the individual is quite often unaware that this thought process is taking place as it is a subconscious mechanism employed by humans to meet our need for consistency and as such cannot be easily altered. This trend is not limited to social media platforms; ideological selectivity also occurs with mainstream television, newspaper and blogs (Kim, 2011) where "liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust" (Mitchell, Matsa, Gottfried & Kiley, 2014). Media availability is determined by economic viability

‘Competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers, and greater competition typically results in more aggressive catering to such prejudices as competitors strive to divide the market’ (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). Further studies into selective exposure have shown that humans will also recall information that fits their preconceived beliefs and hypothesis with more accuracy and are often overconfident in their personal political understanding.

When these predispositions and self-surety are combined with the filtering capacity of SNSs and the algorithms employed to personalise the user's experience, it can create a potentially dangerous silo of polarisation that can undermine democracy (Spohr, 2017). Curation of the online experience has raised concerns that individuals now exist in an echo chamber or “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2012), where users are only exposed to likeminded content that reinforces their existing position on political matters. These users are then able to form groups of like-minded individuals that collectively will not engage with opposing ideas, reinforcing preconceived beliefs en masse and creating political polarisation (Spohr, 2017). “Echo chambers are not about new ideas or (critical) perspectives, they are about how well or effectively the group members reiterate the same idea/belief” (Khosravinik, 2017). The establishment of polarisation results in individuals no longer participating in the democratic process of informed voting but instead using their vote to affirm allegiance to a party or group. This can create an environment of othering where individuals place more worth towards their own group and regard people on the opposing side in an overly negative light. Research has shown that individuals within these homogenous groups may also adopt a more extreme stance within the group to advance their position (Spohr, 2017). If the individual's views support notions associated with racism, nationalism or discriminatory ideals, this could also create an environment that nurtures violence, radicalism and extremism. The algorithms themselves do not necessarily point towards left or right ideology, however in some cases, such as YouTube will direct the user to more extreme content.

Extreme Algorithms

Zeynep Tufekci, Associate Professor at the UNC School of Information and Library Science and contributor to the New York Times, wrote about this phenomenon after recognising changes in her feed while researching the 2016 Presidential election. YouTube coverage of Donald Trump rallies would eventually lead to “white supremacist rants, Holocaust denials and other disturbing content” (Tufekci, 2018). Equally, creating another account that focused on Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders shaped an algorithm of left-wing extremism focusing on conspiracy theories. While Tufekci had started in moderate ground, the algorithm employed by the Google giant to keep people online for longer for monetary profit could push a slight leaning of preferences right into a rabbit hole of radicalism.

"It seems as if you are never "hard core" enough for YouTube's recommendation algorithm. It promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes. Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalising instruments of the 21st century." Zeynep Tufekci

Fake News and News Finds Me

Consumption of curated news has little effect outside of the individual's personal “filter bubble”, however, the dissemination of siloed material that is not subject to fact-checking can result in viral misinformation, or as it is more commonly known as “fake news”. The term “fake news” has been overused in modern political discourse since the 2016 US presidential election. Its original use was as a descriptor for American late night television shows such as *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *Saturday Night Live* which blur the lines between politics and comedy. Now the term is used habitually to oppose or silence differing political principles. Despite the term being popularised by President Donald

Trump in the 2016 presidential election when describing mainstream media outlets, research after the election indicated that fake news stories stemming from Facebook consistently received more engagement than top stories from mainstream media outlets. These “fake news” articles were ironically also more favourable towards Donald Trump with “115 pro-Trump fake articles being shared 30 million times compared to 41 pro-Clinton fake articles shared 7.6 million times” (Spohr, 2017). Who should take responsibility for fake news is a point of contention with some accountability being placed upon those that control the technology (Howard, 2016), while those that own the technology, for instance, Mark Zuckerberg CEO of Facebook, are requesting tighter government regulation of the internet in order to stem the flow of fake news (Wattles & O'Sullivan, 2019). While this to and fro debate continued around statistics and election results, no one could anticipate what was going to unfold in Christchurch and what role social networks may have played.

Google, Facebook and Twitter were put on notice in 2018 by the European Commission who have requested the tech giants remove extremist content within one hour or face fines, however, what is determined to count as extremism seemed to be a point of contention. While terrorist groups such as ISIS have been all but removed from the platforms in a joint blocking effort, a rise in right-wing extremism has been slowly growing while discussions as to whether white supremacy and white nationalism are the same while executives and policymakers sit on their hands. Facebook, in particular, has now changed its stance stating in a blog post "white nationalism and white separatism cannot be meaningfully separated from white supremacy and organized hate groups" ("Standing Against Hate | Facebook Newsroom", 2019) and since Christchurch, has banned related content from the platform delivering a strong message to hate groups (Ingram & Collins, 2019). While this decision has been met with outrage and branded as hindering free speech, it is important to remember that Facebook is a private entity that can set its own policies and user agreements. However, at the same time, Facebook Inc (including Instagram) is unique in that it has to a degree a monopoly of the market and with that comes a responsibility

to the public. As a publicly listed company their primary responsibility is to their shareholders, and to keep making money for their advertisers. Zuckerberg previously held the stance (as do most directors of SNS platforms) that social media sites are not responsible for user content as they are tech companies, not media companies. He has since backtracked on that position during a joint committee hearing of the United States Senate, conceding that Facebook Inc is responsible for the content, changing the dialogue around what the role SNSs play in today's political landscape. Despite these good intentions Facebook still, a month later is hosting the content of the Christchurch video as Facebooks artificial intelligence struggles to keep up with individuals that modify and splice the content to avoid detection (Cox, 2019).

Who is in charge?

This month Sri Lanka was the victim of series of terrorist attacks, claimed by ISIS and rumored as retaliation for the Christchurch massacre, the Sri Lankan government swiftly decided to block all social media to avoid the spread of misinformation because it had no faith in social networks ability to control content on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp and Viber (Hutchinson, 2019). New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Adern who has stated that Facebook shares some responsibility in the video, has announced "Christchurch Calling" an event scheduled for May where global leaders have invited social media executives to plan how to "eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content on social media" ("Christchurch terror attack video a type not seen before, says Facebook", 2019). Australia automatically passed the Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Bill 2019 in response the events in Christchurch which will see tech executives serve jail time, while the UK has introduced the Online Harms White Paper which aims to keep users in the UK safe from online extremism. A parliamentary hearing in the UK into hate crime last week observed Stephen Doughty MP admonish directors of Facebook, Twitter and Google who stated "Your systems are simply not working

and quite frankly it's a cesspit. It feels like your companies don't give a damn. You give a lot of rhetoric, but you don't take action" (Lanxon, 2019).

Where to next?

While government bodies can instigate change and those that control SNSs should take greater responsibility for the accuracy of what is published on their platform, individuals need to take responsibility for their own agency and be proactive about their choice in news consumption and distribution. Fact checking, accessing more diverse content and being open to differing opinion rather than relying on the "algorithms of their newsfeed and the ideological diversity, or the lack of such, of their social media network" (Spohr, 2017) is a start on reopening the lines of communication and raise the standard of what they are consuming. Studies also indicate that when an individual lowers their standard of what news they engage with, they are more susceptible to fake news shared by connections on social media (Spohr, 2017). Social media has created a state of apathy searching for news as the accessibility in news feeds gives the illusion of being well-informed and up to date as the news to come to them. Unfortunately, fake news and lack of diverse opinion are not only limited to social media platforms as mainstream media outlets have become more partisan in their approach to political reporting, motivated by the ratings that accompany adverse polarisation.

To lessen incidences of radicalisation and future acts of extremism accessibility to a diversification of voices and exposure to cross-cutting political ideals are urgently required within social media, and needs to be facilitated by the platform by altering the curated algorithm to include partisan information. The current SNS business model that promotes popularity over fact requires action from the organisations and governing institutions and which is slowly being acknowledged. However, in the meantime this responsibility rests with the individual. It is no longer enough to believe you are being kept informed without proactively seeking news, and importantly different viewpoints to participate in a Web 2.0 democracy.

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