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What challenges and opportunities face journalists and journalism in the age of social media?

Introduction

In 2014 Angela Merkel's government warned that it might be necessary to dismantle Google to protect competitors to ensure the future of democracy in the digital age. Notwithstanding, Google continued to grow its business in the face of continued scrutiny from Brussels resulting in a fine of €2.4 billion in 2017 (search engine sending traffic to its own shopping platform), €4.3 billion in 2018 (for pushing its own Apps via Android operating systems, and €1.8 billion in 2019 (abusive practices brokering online ads including newspapers via Adsense) (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). This means that the European Union has fined Google €8.5 billion in three investigations covering the past decade, yet Google's growth and strategic direction remains unabated (Chee, 2022).

Regardless of attempts to regulate, social media and platform companies act with impunity and are creating an environment where they can change standards frequently, in a way which favour their products and innovations. A further example is Meta's efforts to deter the Canadian government's efforts from passing a bill that would force them to negotiate deals with Canadian publishers either privately or through collective bargaining further (Murphy, 2023). The proposed law would result in mandatory arbitration if a deal could not be struck.

This capacity to plough ahead has allowed these platforms to continuously reinvent themselves and create positions which had previously been socially uncontested and occupied by other institutions. These platforms have become 'intermediary' because of their control over communication channels, a position which publishers once occupied (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). They have placed themselves as the transit point between legacy/news organisation and the audience highlighting the power, privilege and profit that comes from their position anchoring the idea that they are utility and infrastructure companies with responsibility and obligations. It follows that a necessity exists to ensure oversight, scrutiny and regulation in very much the same way that this is insinuated with publishing companies.

The positioning of social media companies as intermediaries, elucidates the concern that they specifically impact news publishers both directly and indirectly. Indirectly because social media is taking an ever-increasing amount of the time people spend with media as well as money spent on advertising. On the other hand, the direct influence on the business of news can also be seen in the way publishers have integrated platform provided elements into their own websites. This intertwining at a technical level covers advertising, analytics, share buttons, demonstrating an evolving connection between publishers that speaks to a fundamental relationship of the contemporary world. This is a world that provides significant opportunities but under conditions we do not understand or control. While the individual is becoming empowered so are social institutions like news media, social and political institutions. Yet all are simultaneously dependent of the socio-technological systems produced by a few for profit (Petre, 2021).

Understanding this helps highlight the fundamental reshaping of our media environment and by extension influencing how we get news. Together with this we should recognise that much of the strength of platforms relies on a global policy regime that normalises the intermediary

liability exemptions provided by section 230 of the Communication Decency Act in the US which has been inserted into two recent trade agreements (Canada and Mexico, and one with Japan) and which the US federal government pushes when making deals, including the EU, the UK and members of WTO (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). This should indicate that the power of platforms as intermediaries is here to stay and is a defining feature of our societies. While the EU Digital Services Act goes some way in establishing a level playing field to foster competitiveness while protecting the fundamental right of users its effectiveness remains to be seen (Commission, 2023). Recognising that this power is here to stay and understanding that this influences how our news is constructed leads us to posit a question. How can we limit the reliance on complex systems that we do not fully understand and seem outside our control?

Reliance on intermediaries

Perhaps it is time to recognise that we have only just begun to grapple with the dampening effects of intermediaries on everything from job creation to new business formation as well as the way technology is reshaping our brains (Foroohar, 2021). These platforms have become gatekeepers, with organisations like Meta and Google embed in many top news organizations with programs that "help" major newspapers create content best tailored to their own business models (such as Facebook Live). There is a consequence to this. The largest technology platform firms today should be thought of as being similar in type to large financial institutions that are thought to be too big to fail. They are the systemically important institutions of our time and deserve coverage by journalists who aren't captured and yet even this embeddedness is problematic.

The presence of an innate reluctance to confront and explore these intermediaries has now become what Usher (2021) defined as platform capture. This is the combined influence of bad actors who rig the tech companies for their own gains, the threat of government regulation, partisanship and hyper partisanship, and Silicon Valley's contradictory ideology that favours libertarian conceptions of privacy, speech, and profit. This creates an opportunity for distortion when mixed with a toxic partisan environment and an unsustainable profit model, enabling platform capture. Pursuing continued user growth at all costs is a market incentive that makes it difficult for platform companies to see beyond the next quarterly earnings report. This is the growth at all costs rhetoric. The interest is simply in capturing audience which in turn creates monitory values and not in the veracity of content (Wu, 2017).

Understanding this leads us to recognise that regulation is one of the few paths open to us. This is because by pushing intermediaries to give up their vast collection of personal data these platform companies, who make profits from deals with third parties such as brands and politicians who, in turn, hope personalised targeting will lead to more persuasive messaging, would not survive. However, access to and regulation of, data would require that platform companies open their proprietary algorithms to the public potentially destroying their competitive bottom line (Usher, 2021). While there have been occasions when intermediaries have granted access even this is not a complete solution (Mervis, 2020).

The main concern is that the more regulation results in an exponential expenditure in lobbying by these intermediaries. If, indeed, regulation is the only real political threat that stands to curb the power of intermediaries, then pandering to the political class is exactly what these

companies will do. What this pandering looks like, however, is much harder to predict. Algorithms are proprietary, we won't know if platform companies overamplify conservative messages beyond their actual organic spreading power. The result is a news media ecosystem that has clear chokepoints where governments and business can apply pressure and that will impact the project of truth telling and critical coverage (Cohen, 2021). Like the press barons of old they (intermediaries) have made deals with politicians and businesses, unburdened by principles about journalism and democracy or anything else that would stand in the way (Curran & Seaton, 2018).

In this case the intermediaries' version of yellow journalism, the American term referring to sensationalistic or biased stories that newspapers presented as objective truth, may well represent a greater danger to democracy than yellow journalism of the past (Tucher, 2022). By consciously exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology, by using the platform to give us a little dopamine hit occasionally, a consequence of someone liking or commenting on a photo or a post, the goal is clear (Zuckerman, 2021). It is the answer to the question 'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?' When Zuckerberg was questioned by congress how he was going to police hate speech, false news etc…he promised he would provide computer algorithms to solve the problem (Cohen, 2021). In giving this reply Zuckerberg demonstrated Meta and Google share a commonality, which is that they do not want to take responsibility for what appears on their platforms. What Google and Facebook ask an algorithm to do is more like matching similar items. A perfect assignment for AI, as it is understood today: that is, not an intelligent machine helping to inform the public but an intelligent machine that keeps the public's attention.

Marshall (2021) points out that every month, Google sends cheques for thousands and millions of dollars to countless publishers that make their journalism possible. This enables Google to appear as a relatively benign overlord. Consequently, Google and Meta now have a dominant position in the entirety of the advertising ecosystem and are using their monopoly power to take more and more of the money for themselves (Schiffrin, 2021). The extent to which technology platform companies have been able to integrate themselves into the fabric of the news industry is a concern for the accountability of both. Google Transparency Project found that there were more than 3,700 separate instances of Google funding journalism projects or journalists at a total cost of around half a billion dollars (Bell, 2021).

Algorithmic dependency
This reliance on platforms creates a further dimension we should consider. News finds me (NFM) is defined as the extent to which individuals believe they can be directly informed, despite not actively following the news, through social media use and algorithmically mediated connections. Consequently, the argument is that algorithmic dependency is a heuristic to capture the degree to which individuals rely on algorithms in platformed news to meet their information needs (Schaetz, Gagrcin, Toth, & Emmer, 2023). This happens regardless of users own misgiving about the control over their own data.

This should be seen in the context that news organisations are increasingly reliant on big social media platforms to ensure circulation of their news using audience engagement as one of their own key benchmarks (Petre, 2021). To these organisations datafication promises to improve news organisations' knowledge of their audience through collection, processing, and

analysis of audience data, so that audience needs and preferences are met. In this way we recognise the self-serving relationship between the platforms and the larger news organisations.

However, platforms and actors (news organisations) who use data to reach audiences have more power over resources than the users who provide this data. This creates a form of social media dependency which can be conceptualised as the degree of helpfulness of social media platforms for achieving personal goals (Kim & Jung, 2017). The problem here is that the overwhelming amount of content competing for users' attention creates an escalating opportunity cost to acquire news (Weeks & Lane, 2022). In this way individuals could consider algorithms an essential resource for obtaining information benefits at a minimum cost further leading them to the view that they do not need to actively seek news, but that news will find them (Gil de Zuniga & Cheng, 2021). In the long run this will create a disenfranchisement of news organisations.

This happens within three dimensions. The first is reliance on peers for information, the second is lack of motivation for news finding and the third is a self-confirming bias believing one is informed and this is enough (Schaetz, Gagrcin, Toth, & Emmer, 2023). It follows that there is a need to understand the backend infrastructure of platformized media system and how it may influence the media ecosystem by deepening and obscuring power asymmetries. Understanding algorithmic dependency is a heuristic which captures the degree to which individuals rely on platform news use to meet their information needs even if they have misgiving about their lack of control over their data (Schaetz, Gagrcin, Toth, & Emmer, 2023).

Looking at algorithmic environments through the lens of algorithmic dependency helps underline algorithmic practices around privacy issues and further helps us decern important implications for the audience. This is crucial as it cannot be assumed that the audience is able to differentiate the ways news finds them. Whether it is through editorial decision making, their own behaviour, platform mechanism or a combination of all these factors. This consideration implies that there exists a need in journalism to channel more resources into privacy protection efforts and closer collaboration between editorial technologists, privacy officers and editorial teams. This should be done to mitigate algorithmic dependency and create strategies on how to communicate to audiences in order to increase trust in journalism.

Within this context the move by Meta downgrade current affairs from Threads app and the axing of Facebook news can be seen as the cynical positioning of a behemoth (Thomas, 2023). This is seen to be a serious threat to democracy by choking trusted news.

Redirecting this reliance.
The above notes that of greatest concern is the nature of how Google and Facebook make money from advertising, by collecting user data and tracking behaviour and content. This embeds them within the field of practice for publishers (Bell, 2021). Neither Google nor Facebook have a consistent policy of sharing their data on funded projects or even of disclosing the terms or amount of the funding (Christin, 2020). Thus, an unequal playing field is created where journalists and academic researchers are often asked to sign nondisclosure agreements as a condition of receiving funding. This means that the terms of the platforms'

engagement with the news business are arbitrary and unregulated and lack both data and oversight. The key word being unregulated.

Research suggests that the spikes in funding journalism come from external regulatory pressure and can be seen as analogous to lobbying or marketing expenditure (Bell, 2021). Yet, this does not happen without consequence. One example that underlines this is when in 2016 Facebook pushed video production as an advertising priority. It launched Facebook Live as a video service, soliciting commissions from publishers with financial incentives. Newsrooms, including Mic and Mashable, reshaped themselves around video and in Mic's case directly in response to the sums of money offered by Facebook (Abbruzzese, 2017). Then, when about two years later the social media platform changed its mind, many newsrooms had to lay off staff, and some—such as Mic— had to close altogether (Patel, 2019).

This trend is further lead by Google, and, as noted above, its deliberate policy of funding journalism directly, which is unprecedented and also deserves further scrutiny. Inevitably this will lead to an overriding preoccupation trying to understand what Google wants and influences what newsrooms choose to develop. The consequence of this is well put by Emily Bell, "Everyone who has built a successful news product online knows that the technical architecture, tools, software, and analytics applied to journalism inevitably end up shaping aspects of editorial content." (Bell, 2021).

When journalism entangles itself with intermediaries and platforms what dominates? This discussion thus far has given us clarity that the power of platforms and intermediaries is an unequal contest. Yet, it would be foolish to assume that there exists no solution or push back which could counter the prevailing dominance of intermediaries. Past attempts to counter the direction of misinformation have not always been felicitous. In the past there was an attempt to ban fake news by the League of Nations (Tucher, 2022). In the inter world war period there was also an attempt to educate Americans and to teach children and adults how to identify fake news and identify prejudices (Tucher, 2022). During the McCarthy period in the 1950s the US Democrats also tried an abortive campaign to outlaw wilful distorted campaign materials (Tucher, 2022). This proved fruitless. What is the solution?

A redirection of thinking
There is no easy fix that can give long term succour to news publishers that would ensure a more level playing field. Yes, historical legacy organisations of the likes of *The New York Times* (Robertson, 2023)*, The Times* (UK) (Fletcher, 2022), *The Financial Times* (Tobitt,C., 2022) are now making significant profits. However, this can but disguise the underlying uncertainty that dominates the industry and fore shadows the underlying influence that intermediaries possess. What reforms can we think of, create, which can lead us to a more equitable environment which would ultimately provide a safe environment to acquire journalism?

Maybe education in media literacy. Including this in national curricula would certainly help create an understanding of how social media operates and would shed light on the need to have clear and viable news services. Maybe transparency, certainly in the way intermediaries harness and utilise data with access to their algorithms. Most certainly transparency in who uses the data and how algorithms are utilised. If this fails perhaps public shaming, boycotts or pressure groups would become necessary. We could look at the problem from different angles

and create some kind of official credentialing for journalists. By providing an encrypted platform for publishing houses to populate their journalism, a source of information can be created which offers a low level of guidance to the source of information. This would act as a guide to the audience to question the sources and create a modicum of control on how platforms provide information and from where it emanates.

The rational around this would be that it would ultimately strive to enhance objectivity. This is relevant because objectivity is a social process, a cog in the great self-correcting mechanism of a democratic society. Power has its levers, politicians have leverage. Journalists have objectivity, which is a procedural questioning, pursued in public, but that must ultimately be checked factually. Objective journalists test and evaluate evidence with intellectual honesty and openness following the evidence wherever it leads. If professionals, scientists, endeavour to be transparent about their methods why shouldn't journalism create credentials which underscore the rigour that is needed to perform their role in a democratic system.

Maybe part of the solution is the regulation of Facebook and other immensely powerful and unaccountable intermediaries. The time has come to dig into the algorithms running Facebook and Google that shape the information and data flowing online. The questions to pose going forward relate to the limits set by intermediaries using the idea of a black box as a functional analogy to algorithms. Conceptualising algorithms as black boxes simultaneously render a problem unknowable (Bucher, 2018). Perhaps, all that is needed is to find a way into the black box. Scholars have extended the notion of auditing to the field of algorithms, arguing for the need to conduct audit studies of algorithms in order to detect and combat forms of algorithmic discrimination (Bruossard, 2023).

Pasquale provocatively puts it, "you can't form a trusting relationship with a black box" (2015: 83). For him, black boxes must be revealed in order to counteract any wrongdoings, discrimination, or bias these systems may contain: "algorithms should be open for inspection—if not by the public at large, at least by some trusted auditor" (2015: 141). Here, opening up may simply involve making source code accessible. As noted in a lawsuit filed in US federal court, the law may constitute an additional barrier to access—in this case, "preventing researchers from collecting data to determine whether online algorithms result in discrimination" (Grauer, 2016). Yet even without this access we have ample evidence to show that algorithmic bias has not been banished and can be seen to be growing (Bruossard, 2023). The question remains, how do you counter the leviathans that are the intermediaries? If the state has neither the appetite nor the capacity to regulate what are the solutions? It is time to begin to understand that an auditing process must be created that has the academic rigour and authority to act as a social shield. We are now in a situation where intermediaries should come with a health warning. Why are we waiting?

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