

Inquiring Minds topic - 13 April 2018

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Should the Internet Be Regulated? If So, Who or What Should Do This?

From Thomas Jefferson to the present, many people in the United States have asserted that knowledge of what is happening is essential to democracy. People get their knowledge or what we may call news of the world from many sources. Newspapers have a long and checkered history of the provision of the news. Newspapers competed for timeliness and accuracy. Radio and television changed the parameter of timeliness. The airwaves or as we now call it "bandwidth" was deemed public property, the use of which was licensed by the government to operators who obeyed the "fairness doctrine". This gave us the likes of Peter Jennings, Huntley and Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, who projected confidence that what they told us was "true". Most of us accepted that.

That was then and this is a new world of communication. It is widely reported that a majority of people in the United States now get their news from internet sources such as Facebook.

There are a huge number of news events happening all the time. How is an event selected for prominence in the internet news feed? Facebook has disclosed that it has an algorithm that makes that selection. Some of the criteria come from its model of each person who is a user of Facebook. This is done on the same system used to identify advertisements to send to each user. Thus, if I were on Facebook I would not receive the same news stories as you would if you were on Facebook. Thus the news received by a right wing Republican would be a different selection from the news received by a left wing Democrat. How could either make a good judgment?

There is another aspect to the algorithm. A posting by someone which becomes widely viewed results in money paid to the poster. One can make a living out of widely viewed postings. The more sensational the more viewed and the more income!

This pattern is common to most of the internet services. Facebook and Google have asserted that each is attempting to identify and sometimes delete false or offensive stories. They do not explain how a determination is made of what is false, or mostly false, or when it should be deleted.

The New York Times, Sunday January 14, 2018 reported: "SAN FRANCISCO - One morning in October, the editors of Pagina Siete, Bolivia's third largest news site, noticed that traffic to their outlet coming from Facebook was plummeting.

"The publication had recently been hit by cyberattacks, and editors feared it was being targeted by hackers loyal to the government of President Evo Morales.

"But it wasn't the government's fault. It was Facebook's. The Silicon Valley company was testing a new version of its hugely popular News Feed, peeling off professional news sites from

what people normally see and relegating them to a new section of Facebook called Explore. Like it or not. Bolivia had become a guinea pig in the company's continual quest to reinvent itself.

"As Facebook updates and tweaks its service in order to keep users glued to their screens, countries like Bolivia are ideal testing grounds thanks to their growing internet-savvy populations. But these changes can have significant consequences, like limiting the audience for nongovernmental news sources and - surprisingly - amplifying the impact of fabricated and sensational stories."

Does the algorithm get corrupted? On 28 January 2018 the New York times had a front page article with two pages inside to document that the answer is YES! One way is to create a robot to pretend to be a person who has likes and repeat those thousands of times.

Mid March has seen a deluge of news about Facebook user data "mined" for the benefit of a British corporation financed by an American to influence the 2016 election. 50,000,000 Facebook users had their data used. See New York Times, 18 March 2018, front page.

24 March 2018, USA Today stated: "Craigslist to drop personal ads after sex trafficking law passes." The Senate passed (97-2) the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act.

Every day a new wrinkle on the internet transmission of information appears. Alex Jones has been sued three more times for defamation. Zuckerberg apologizes to the 50,000,000 people whose information was taken by Cambridge Analytical. New information surfaces on the Russian interference with the 2016 election. By the time of our discussion much more will have happened!

Here is a partial list of problems:

- 1. What of a false or provocative statement to make money for the poster? (Alex Jones)**
- 2. What of a plant by a foreign government to influence an election? (Russia)**
- 3. Is the discrimination as to which user gets which news something that perpetuates the divisions in the country?**
- 4. Should someone create a standard for the algorithms? (U.S. Government or Facebook or someone else.)**
- 5. If a standard were to be created by the government would that be prohibited by the 1st Amendment?**
- 6. Can a voluntary regulation be effective?**
- 7. How does regulation affect the economic model which has been so profitable to Facebook, Google &c?**