

The Contradiction between Algorithms and Social Responsibility. A Story about Meta Journalism Project

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Abstract: *The aim of this article is to critically examine the role of the Facebook platform in undermining the informational ecosystem. I posit that its business model, algorithm, and the reinforced digital culture stand in contrast to its social responsibility initiatives aimed at bolstering professional journalism like Meta (Facebook) Journalism project. Essentially, I intend to problematize how Facebook portrays itself as a saviour of journalism, enhancing its reputation, when it intensifies the challenges faced by this profession, positioning itself as a negative force in the big narrative about the asymmetric relationship implied by design between social media and mass-media.*

Keywords: *Meta Journalism Project; social responsibility; algorithm; public interest; platformization;*

Introduction

The influence of Facebook on democratic societies became widely recognized in 2018, with the Cambridge Analytica scandal¹ bringing it to public attention. Ordinary people began to understand Facebook's lack of social accountability, especially in the context of the US elections and Brexit. This issue was indirectly highlighted by BuzzFeed three months before the 2016 US presidential elections, pointing out the platform's role in disseminating misinformation. The publication drew comparisons between the news consumption on social media from mainstream platforms and from lesser-known ones that propagated deceptive content, illustrating the public's appetite towards false information². The Cambridge Analytica scandal ignited ongoing public debates and set off a chain reaction of similar controversies. The year 2021 marked the company's most challenging period in terms of public reputation since its inception in 2004. Key events included the January 2021 Capitol riot and a comprehensive investigation by *The Wall Street Journal* in September 2021, based on a whistleblower's documents³. In October of the same year, the former employee who leaked these documents spoke out on

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files>

² <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook>

³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>

CNN's "60 Minutes" TV program about the platform's algorithmic issues and revealed her identity⁴. In that year, company founder Mark Zuckerberg faced questioning in the US Congress. Amidst these challenges, Facebook implemented two public relations strategies: launching the Facebook Journalism Program in 2017⁵, and rebranding itself as Meta in 2021, positioning the company as "A Social Technology Company"⁶. This article aims to critically examine Facebook's dual approach to its societal role, focusing on its internal social responsibility policies and the Facebook Journalism Project. We argue that the Facebook Journalism Project is a subtle form of whitewashing, an effort to enhance the company's public image.

The business model of platforms. Nothing comes for free

In the published literature, the Internet, as the main communication and information tool of our times, it is seen as "an imaginary space between a technological dream and an economic reality" (ten Oever 346). This description emphasizes the tension between the idea of public interest that can reside in the Internet⁷ and the pursuit of profit. This phenomenon was encapsulated in the concept 'platform society' (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal). The instrumentalization of the Internet is not producing only good affordances at the level of the business model of technological companies, therefore is in opposition to the optimistic approach that the internet will assure democratic values in the social structure and digital culture created around the digital services they provide through social media platforms. "There is a growing discontent with tech companies that have become too big and multifaceted to operate transparently in the public eye; their extraordinary power also negatively affects markets and democracies" (van Dijck 2803).

The business model of Facebook is not a complicated one and is focused on brand awareness advertising (Frenkel and Kang 65). The model relies on leveraging its massive user base, data, and advertising capabilities to connect businesses with highly targeted audiences and generate revenue through advertising. This implies that to maintain the service free for the users, the user's data that they are collecting are commodified. The collected data assures instrumental opportunities to third parties to make online campaigns through Ads Manager and Ads Centre, without knowing exactly the person they are targeting, but having access to large amounts of processed data about their social, psychological, and demographic specificities. The internet platforms Google and Meta, often referred to as a "duopoly", command over

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lx5VmAdZSI&t>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/introducing-facebook-journalism-project>

⁶ <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/facebook-company-is-now-meta/>

⁷ See the The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto, available here: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50934>

half of the digital advertising expenditure (UNESCO 18). This business model construct – revenue from brand awareness advertising campaigns – has another side of the coin. The social media platforms have become an ‘obligatory passage point’ (Callon 1986) for communication and information routines and practices, and “the public sphere is now operated by a small number of private companies, based in Silicon Valley” (Bell qtd. in Nielsen & Ganter 1603). This aspect reinforces asymmetric relationship of power between social media companies, users and third parties’ businesses and is defined as ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff):

Surveillance capitalists know everything *about us*, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable *to us*. They accumulate vast domains of new knowledge *from us*, but not *for us*. They predict our futures for the sake of others’ gain, not ours. As long as surveillance capitalism and its behavioural futures markets are allowed to thrive, ownership of the new means of behavioural modification eclipses ownership of the means of production as the fountainhead of capitalist wealth and power in the twenty-first century (Zuboff 17-18).

In this theoretical model, social media companies don’t focus on the needs of the users. They do not adopt a social responsibility perspective; the public interest or the public trust are not in their managerial primary focus or in the business mindset. “The platform Web is made up of privately owned public spaces, largely governed by the commercial incentives of private actors rather than the collective good of the broader society” (Owen qtd. in Van Dijck 2803). It is a problem of ethics in how capitalists are envisioning the social partnership between the business organizations and the stakeholders. If we compare the philosophy regarding the relationship between business and society, from European Union (EU) and United States of America (USA) we can observe a difference. In the EU it’s an emphasis on the stakeholder approach, and in the USA the perspective is focused on the benefit of the shareholders (Rughiniș, 2022: 35-37). This implies the existence of a systemic culture that characterizes these spatial distributed differences that will, therefore, establish a path dependency upon which societies will try to resolve the asymmetries. In the stakeholder approach, the emphasis is placed on understanding how value is created and distributed (Parmar et. al). This approach challenges managers to rethink traditional management practices, aiming not only to enhance value creation but also to forge explicit connections between business operations and ethical considerations. It encourages a comprehensive evaluation of how business decisions impact various stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and the environment, alongside shareholders. The underlying principle is to balance

the interests of all these groups, thereby integrating ethical considerations into the core of business strategy and operations.

The stakeholder/shareholder visions are also reflected around platform regulation. In the EU, the Digital Services Act⁸ has come into operation to address the pressing issues of online hate speech, child sexual abuse, and the spread of disinformation, introducing a pioneering legislation that is specifically targeting online content⁹. These laws represent the first of their kind, focusing directly on the regulation and control of digital content to safeguard users and uphold digital safety standards. This legislative effort marks a significant step towards creating a more secure and responsible online environment, where harmful and illegal content is effectively identified and mitigated, thus protecting vulnerable groups, and promoting factual and respectful discourse.

The second pillar of the response of EU to digital platforms is the Digital Markets Act¹⁰ that will establish a comprehensive set of obligations that gatekeepers must adhere to; these include prohibitions against engaging in anti-competitive practices, ensuring a level playing field in the digital market¹¹:

The European Union (EU), despite a scarcity of home-grown “big” tech companies, tries to position itself as a governmental agent of change in the global digital economy. In its policy document *Shaping Europe’s digital future* (2019), the European Commission (EC) articulated its seemingly incongruous ambitions to prioritize tech innovation leadership in the data economy alongside a commitment to protect democratic and public values in the platform society, promoting a level playing field and open markets along with transparency, trustworthiness, and privacy (van Dijck, 2803).

In Canada (BILL C-18 - The Online News Act¹²) and in Australia (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code¹³) there are two laws through which the states want to protect the media industries and reduce the asymmetries between platforms and media institutions by obliging

⁸ See the Digital Services Act, available here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?toc=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A277%3ATOC&uri=uriserv%3A0J.L_.2022.277.01.0001.01.ENG

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/06/eu-unveils-package-laws-curb-power-big-tech-giants>

¹⁰ https://digital-markets-act.ec.europa.eu/index_en

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/06/eu-unveils-package-laws-curb-power-big-tech-giants>

¹² See the text of the bill here: <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/bill/C-18/royal-assent>

¹³ See the text of the bill here <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2021A00021>

the technology companies to share revenue with the publishers they aggregate their news from; in Canada the law will fully take effect by the end of 2023 and in Australia the regulations are already taking effect. In the USA there is a similar approach - The Journalism Competition and Preservation Act¹⁴ - which follows the legislative process with difficulty.

One of the effects made by the EU legislation is the possibility of the user from EU, European Economic Area, and Switzerland to adopt a subscription option for Facebook and Instagram starting from November 2023. This means that the users can select now between two options: they can either continue to access their services for free, which includes personalized advertising, or they can opt for a subscription that removes ads; during the subscription period, their data will not be utilized for advertising purposes¹⁵. Regarding this measure Meta company stated:

We believe in an ad-supported internet, which gives people access to personalized products and services regardless of their economic status. It also allows small businesses to reach potential customers, grow their business and create new markets, driving growth in the European economy. And like other companies we'll continue to advocate for an ad-supported internet, even with our new subscription offering in the EU, EEA and Switzerland. But we respect the spirit and purpose of these evolving European regulations, and are committed to complying with them.¹⁶

As we can see in the official statement above, Facebook is far from changing its business model and adapting it through internal policies (self-regulation) to a vision that would consider the needs of the stakeholders (users, employers, media companies, government, business, NGOs). The focus on the revenue stream determined by the ads it's the one that marked important technological updates on the platform such as: the News Feed (launched in 2006), the reaction(s) button (launched in 2009, redesigned in 2016), and the Facebook News feature (launched in 2019), that maintained or grown the engagement. Therefore, is hard to let go the money incentives for moral ones.

¹⁴ See the act here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1094/text?s=1&r=17>

¹⁵ <https://about.fb.com/news/2023/10/facebook-and-instagram-to-offer-subscription-for-no-ads-in-europe/#:~:text=We%20believe%20in%20an%20ad,growth%20in%20the%20European%20economy>.

¹⁶ <https://about.fb.com/news/2023/10/facebook-and-instagram-to-offer-subscription-for-no-ads-in-europe/#:~:text=We%20believe%20in%20an%20ad,growth%20in%20the%20European%20economy>.

Silicon Vally, we have an algorithmic problem!

One of the biggest problems for Facebook algorithm started with the introduction of News Feed in 2006. This is the beginning of algorithmic curation on social media platforms. The launch of this new feature wasn't well received by the public: the users were protesting offline and online. That was the case of an online group called *Students Against Facebook News Feed*. This moment is depicted in the literature:

The group was furious that relationship updates were suddenly being posted in what felt like a public message board. Why did Facebook need to broadcast that a relationship had gone from “Just friends” to “It’s complicated”? they asked. Others were dismayed to see their summer vacation photos shared with the world. Though the feature built on information they had made public on the site, users were just now coming face-to-face with everything Facebook knew about them. The encounter was jarring. (Frenkel and Kang 45)

This situation highlights the users' realization of the extent of personal information they have shared on Facebook, and their confrontation with this reality. It's an epiphany on how much Facebook knows about them. Even though the idea of curation is a service created with the intention that we will save time from searching on our friends' profile, it will nurture over the years issues like echo chambers, disinformation and hate speech.

At the time, Mark Zuckerberg made a post on Facebook, called “Calm down. Breathe. We hear you”, saying:

We've been getting a lot of feedback about Mini-Feed and News Feed. We think they are great products, but we know that many of you are not immediate fans, and have found them overwhelming and cluttered. Other people are concerned that non-friends can see too much about them. We are listening to all your suggestions about how to improve the product; it's brand new and still evolving.

We're not oblivious of the Facebook groups popping up about this (by the way, Ruchi is not the devil). And we agree, stalking isn't cool; but being able to know what's going on in your friends' lives is. This is information people used to dig for on a daily basis, nicely reorganized and summarized so people can learn about the people they care about. You don't miss the photo album about your friend's trip to Nepal. Maybe if your friends are all going to a party, you want to know so you

can go too. Facebook is about real connections to actual friends, so the stories coming in are of interest to the people receiving them, since they are significant to the person creating them.¹⁷

This starting point of Facebook's News Feed shows us that the algorithm was problematic since the beginning. But even though the users were saying that they hate the new feature, their actions said another thing: engagement on the platform was doubled in the following days after the launch¹⁸. The reaction of Mark Zuckerberg is showing the complex interplay between user experience, privacy, social norms, and the evolving nature of digital platforms. It highlights the early challenges faced by social media companies in balancing commercial objectives with the ethical and social implications of their products, challenges that weren't sustainably resolved over time.

The goal of News Feed today, as defined by Facebook, is to:

deliver the right content to the right people at the right time so they don't miss the stories that are important to them. Ideally, we want News Feed to show all the posts people want to see in the order they want to read them.¹⁹

These strategic statements are carrying significant social implications related to information diversity, public discourse, personal well-being, and democratic engagement. Balancing these factors is a complex challenge that requires ongoing dialogue among tech companies, users, policymakers, and scholars. This machine learning algorithm it raises questions about the criteria used to determine what is "right" for each individual and how these determinations are made, the potentially limited exposure to diverse perspectives and critical thinking, the low degree of the agency of the users and the limited ability to influence their own decisions made by the setup (by design).

The problems of the News Feed algorithm are multiple. The algorithm is primarily designed to maximize advertising revenue and you don't have the option to turn it off because it collapses the engagement of users on the platform²⁰ and Facebook recognizes this:

¹⁷

<https://web.archive.org/web/20061024024254/http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2208197130>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSAyDT5Uzbg>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/News-Feed-FYI-A-Window-Into-News-Feed>

²⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/11/13/facebook-news-feed-algorithm-how-to-turn-it-off/>

Our ranking isn't perfect, but in our tests, when we stop ranking and instead show posts in chronological order, the number of stories people read and the likes and comments they make decrease.²¹

There's a risk that algorithms prioritize sensational or engaging content that may not be factually accurate or of high quality and is reinforced, for example, by the angry reactions of the users to the post²². The lack of transparency and accountability it's another problem that was addressed by the scholar's community; the algorithm is operating as a 'black box', meaning that the company does not disclose the specific details of how it works: "we have no clear idea of just how far much of this information can travel, how it is used, or its consequences" (Pasquale 3). Furthermore, the restrictions set up through Application Programming Interfaces (API)²³ are also affecting the social media researchers who cannot investigate the negative effects because they do not have access to data (Bruns). Other issue identified is that through XCheck the platform gives privileged treatment to VIP users (powerful actors in the network) that are spreading harmful content, and they are not facing the same rules as ordinary users (Horwitz). Finally, the algorithm is suppressing the traffic of posts that include external links to the Facebook ecosystem.

The digital culture of the middlemen. Facebook and Journalism - Status Update: "It's Complicated"

Journalism is a professional field that faces multiple problems. The idea of social responsibility in media studies is related with the 'public interest' concept. From the normative theory standpoint, the notion of 'public interest' advocates for a form of journalism that ensures citizens are adequately informed, thereby empowering them to make well-informed decisions as proactive participants in society. Denis McQuail's perspective on the social responsibility of mass media highlights the balance between media freedom and its societal obligations. His insights provide a roadmap for ethical, accountable, and public-oriented journalism. Even though the concept is a hard one to define briefly, McQuail's considers that public interest in journalism means "serving fundamental communication needs of the whole society and

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/News-Feed-FYI-A-Window-Into-News-Feed>

²² https://edition.inquirer.com/infinity/article_popover_share.aspx?guid=56f456d8-19cc-454b-a54c-b5b75389cef3

²³ APIs serve as a crucial intermediary layer, facilitating communication and interaction between distinct software systems. In the context of social media research, they play a vital role in enabling the seamless exchange of data across various applications. This functionality allows for more effective aggregation and analysis of social media data, enhancing the depth and scope of research in this field.

community as well as of groups and individuals”, in close relations with the ‘common good’ philosophy (McQuail 33).

One of the problems of journalism is the dilution of its own metaphor as the watchdog of democracy. Media institutions are facing complex distrust due to political or economic partisanship/ capture/ instrumentalization of the media for private interest. Challenges to the freedom of the press typically had political origins or economical origins (Salzburg Global Seminar, Session 396, Final Statement). In the context of social media, the economic pressure comes from two directions: the business model of the media outlet and the business model of the social media platform. If both models focus on maximizing the financial gains, we cannot impose that the social responsibility will prevail in this setting. The flow of media institutions is in competition with the flow of social networks/ the tension between quality journalism and the rush to increase the number of accesses to media sites. This is observed as platformization of the news that implies:

a shift from an editorially-driven to a demand-driven news production and distribution process, in which content is continuously modulated, and repackaged, informed by datafied user feedback. (Poell et al. 10)

The platformisation process is explaining how the news production is increasingly customized to adhere to the organizing principles and mechanisms that power the platform ecosystem and signalised the Facebook’s role in governing the news industry (van Dijck et al. 50, qtd. in Jurno, d’Andréa 520).

Journalism has not resolved its own dilemma: whether it is a profession or a hobby (Petre, Nănescu), and gazing from distance, especially in the context of new technologies, it seems to be a job that anyone can do. This aspect is reinforced by the participatory culture that social media promotes. Furthermore, we confront with an erosion of journalistic voices and expertise in the public space. This erosion is produced by the specifics of the Facebook platform which, through the mixture of expert voices, pseudo-experts, and amateurs, quickly devalues everything. The platform does not develop a critical mass, but a cacophonous mass of voices, it is a veritable modern ‘Babel tower’ (Haidt).

We are the good guys. Meta (Facebook) Journalism Project

The Meta (Journalism) Project (MJP/FJP) was launched in January 2017 and was introduced as a program that would “establish stronger ties between Facebook and the news industry”²⁴. MJP was started at a critical juncture for the platform, that was dealing with problems in several of the areas in which it

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/introducing-facebook-journalism-project>

operated, including disinformation campaigns, botched product launches, and privacy scandals (Stelter, qtd. in Jurno, d'Andréa 511). Also, the project was considered to be an attempt to strengthen the platform as a compulsory point of passage for journalism (Jurno, d'Andréa 520).

In the initial statement that launched the initiative there were three pillars defined on which the program would run: collaborative development of news products, training & tools for journalists, training & tools for everyone²⁵.

The first course of action aimed to improve cooperation with news organizations by emphasizing joint product development and the evolution of storytelling formats. In order to better serve the interests of partners and users, it entailed integrating Facebook's engineering teams with media partners from the outset of development. Along with promoting local news, this course of action emphasized investigating new revenue models, testing novel subscription strategies, and organizing hackathons to provide creative technology solutions. The program's regular involvement with media partners through conferences, seminars, and international events was another element of this section.

The second line of action was focused on expanding Facebook support for journalists with new initiatives including e-learning courses on Facebook products, tools, and services, available in nine additional languages, and a certification curriculum developed with Poynter. The company wanted to engage with newsrooms worldwide to share best practices and to enhance training for local newsrooms through collaborations with various journalism organizations. Additionally, Facebook wanted to offer for free the CrowdTangle instrument for partners, to help journalists track story performance and find influencers. They wanted to develop tools for Facebook Live, including allowing journalists to go live on behalf of a Page and offering insights on video performance. Facebook also intended to create a virtual verification community that would examine the flow of eyewitness material during breaking news events.

The final course of action was dedicated to improving news literacy among its users and supporting journalism. The company intended to work with researchers, educators, and journalists to teach consumers how to identify reliable news sources. Initially, initiatives to improve news literacy involved supporting studies and projects and collaborating with academic institutions. Together with the News Literacy Project, they would create public service announcements and were thinking about providing funding to help news organizations with this endeavour. Facebook wanted to keep up its efforts to stop news hoaxes by enhancing reporting tools, removing financial incentives

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/introducing-facebook-journalism-project>

for spammers, and working with outside fact-checking groups in accordance with Poynter's International Fact Checking Code of Principles.

As we can observe, the MJP is an ambitious project, that sums up in its intention particular problems that the informational ecosystem is facing. Unfortunately, Facebook is not offering reports on the impact that this program has and is only publishing news about some of the initiatives ruled through the program. Recently, Columbia Journalism Review published an article in which the efforts of The Tow Center for Digital Journalism are presented, aimed to map the grants offered by MJP in the USA²⁶. The article traces „559 news organizations that shared nearly \$29.9 million of direct funding through 17 MJP programs”²⁷. With most for-profit news companies failing to report receiving such cash, together with Meta's lack of transparency regarding gifts and donations, it is nearly impossible to create a comprehensive record without much greater disclosure from the firm itself.²⁸ Furthermore, there is the implication that MJP initiative was partially a PR stunt to win over powerful publishers to its cause as the business fights legislation restrictions around the world. Moreover, the effectiveness of this strategy is not clear given the rising threats of regulation initiatives²⁹. On the other hand, media organizations show an increased dependence on “the tools, services, and networks provided by platforms” and less on the grants (Papaevangelou 15).

Discussion

The Meta Journalism Project is facing some of the same problems as the parent platform, creating asymmetric logics of power (Jurno, d'Andréa). Through its financial aid, Facebook is becoming a media patron (Papaevangelou 11), that could potentially influence the process of regulation worldwide and compromise the editorial independence of news organizations. The platform is preserving and concentrating its power. Furthermore, the lack of transparency regarding how the grants are granted or refused is raising questions about how vigorous the social responsibility of Facebook really is and how honest an initiative MJP.

This article calls for a reevaluation of Facebook's role in journalism and the informational ecosystem. It advocates for more responsible and ethical practices that align with the public interest, and for a greater understanding of the implications of digital culture and algorithms on professional journalism. The interaction between Facebook's algorithms and social responsibility in journalism presents a complex, multifaceted challenge. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort involving journalists, regulators, technology

²⁶ https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/how-meta-funded-journalism.php

²⁷ https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/how-meta-funded-journalism.php

²⁸ https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/how-meta-funded-journalism.php

²⁹ https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/how-meta-funded-journalism.php

companies and the public. The path forward should aim at creating a digital ecosystem that supports robust, independent journalism while harnessing the benefits of technology. Looking ahead, the future of journalism in the digital age will likely involve a balance between adapting to recent technologies and maintaining journalistic integrity. This might involve innovative models of journalism that leverage technology while upholding the principles of ethical reporting and public interest.

In the literature review we identify another problem. Even though the social media are deplatforming³⁰ celebrity users that are breaking the rules, therefore, the platforms assume the role of moderator, “when deplatformed social media celebrities migrate to alternative platforms, these sites are given a boost through media attention and increases in user counts” (Rogers 214). This suggests that while removing harmful content falls under the purview of social responsibility, media literacy instruction must also be included for users to distinguish between quality and low-quality content and to avoid following online influencers mindlessly on the platforms to which they have migrated.

The problems we are facing are complex. We don't imply that drastic and abrupt measure could be the answer but is an urgent need for a jointly effort and initiatives, from multiple directions, through different organizations, for the benefit of different stakeholders in order not to have an irreversibly polluted informational ecosystem. Nevertheless, regulations measures taken by the governments are necessary and must be taken with accountability.

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³⁰ prohibit (a person who holds opinions that are deemed objectionable or inappropriate) from participating in a discussion or forum, especially by blocking them on a certain website (Oxford Languages)

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