

Facebook has become a public service. It needs to start acting like one.

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Facebook has created an echo chamber by only showing its users what they want to see, which means political polarisation, hyper-partisanship and culture wars. Facebook needs to face up to its responsibilities.

This piece is part of our [What is public service?](#) series.



President Obama meets Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. Pablo Martinez Monsivais / AP/Press Association Images. All rights reserved Facebook has ruined journalism. In May 2016 an American newspaper proved it. As politics on either side of the Atlantic span out of control, unnoticed by most, the Wall Street Journal laid bare one of the greatest problems of the social media age. Hidden away in a corner of The Journal's website, a little graphic named [Red Feed, Blue Feed](#) showed us just what happens when Facebook becomes the primary source of news.

Take any issue, perhaps gun politics, and The Journal will show how a conservative Facebook user gets an impassioned defence of gun rights, at the same time as a liberal user is told how necessary gun control is. With one graphic, the newspaper illustrated a problem a select few journalists and academics have spent years worrying about: the 'filter bubble'.

The term itself is a relatively new one. Designed to highlight how personalised feeds increasingly ensure we live in an echo chamber of ideas and opinions we already agree with, Eli Pariser could probably claim to have coined the term in his book and [TED talk](#) of the same name in 2011. Though still fairly obscure, as Guardian editor Katharine Viner's [recent piece](#) showed, filter bubbles are just about starting to enter into mainstream consciousness. Invariably that consciousness is limited to those involved in the media, those who write about it, or those who profess to care about its future.

However, while it remains a relatively niche concern, its impact is anything but. The filter bubble feeds our biases. Whatever the issue, Remain or Leave, Hillary or Donald, the filter bubble makes sure right-leaning users get right-leaning news, and left-leaning users get left-leaning news. Whatever their political persuasion, Facebook users are

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Inevitably, this echo chamber plays out in real life. Political polarisation, hyper-partisanship and culture wars are its by-products. More concerning still, Facebook's upending of traditional distribution channels has given rise to a completely new set of news organisations. News organisations where the purpose of publishing a story is to excite its audience into sharing it on Facebook and where facts are treated as very much an afterthought. Although they both may be loathe to admit it, The Canary on the one side, and Breitbart on the other, are just two sides of the same coin.

This wouldn't matter too much if Facebook was only one of the ways that people found out about the world. Unfortunately, the opposite is increasingly true. By some estimates, [nearly half of US adults get their news from Facebook](#) and the situation only gets more pronounced the younger the audience gets. Whether we like it or not, Facebook has inadvertently become the most important media company in history. A slight tweak to its underlying algorithms can decimate businesses, influence millions of votes, or create entirely new cultural icons.

This immense power comes with an immense responsibility that Facebook has so far done its best to shirk. Whereas old style newspaper or TV magnates at least paid [lip service](#) to the influence they exerted over society and all it implied, Facebook has recently positioned itself as an impartial platform, [committed to 'neutrality'](#), with no right to regulate how people use it, and no interest in public service.

It's easy to understand why. Facebook is in the advertising business, and giving the customer exactly what they want is good for that business. The filter bubble is good to the business, so the business will be good to the filter bubble, regardless of whether the entire world's news consumption begins to look a little bit too much like Red Feed, Blue Feed.

So where does that leave us? Well, not in a particularly great place. It looks a lot like the only company capable of addressing the filter bubble is one that has every reason to keep that bubble from bursting. A business that relies on advertising will never take the risk of putting stories in front of its audience that might decrease engagement. Our gut reaction was to think impartiality would be key: some sort of independent news source completely free from bias, able to both provide news and challenge opinions equally across the board.

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Luckily, in the UK at least, it seems like we already have a ready made solution: the BBC. The organisation's commitment to balance and fairness would make it seem like an obvious bulwark against the increasingly polarised media we see online.

Frustratingly, it hasn't quite worked out like that. Whilst 30 years ago people might have been willing to trust a single source for all their news, the internet has changed the game. People have become used to hearing multiple voices on any single topic and trying to switch behaviour back to a single 'authoritative' broadcaster isn't really a viable plan, given modern habits. You only have to look at some of the vitriol directed at the BBC, whether by The Daily Mail's editorial page, or even elements of the left, to realise that it is impossible to elevate one voice above partisan politics. Any solution that ignores this basic fact in pursuit of a totally impartial media is doomed to fail.

Instead, we think it is platforms, not publishers, that hold the key. Rather than trying to achieve the impossible goal of trying to write an objective version of a story, a platform can concentrate on collating together multiple perspectives on any given topic, whilst avoiding the filter bubble trap. We think you can build a platform where you can easily a rounded view on a story. A place where you're just as likely to find The Guardian or the New Statesman's take on

Training as those of The Spectator or The Times. A platform where stories are grouped by topic rather than by author.

In order to pull this off, we think it probably has to come with a price tag for the consumer. The publishers, newspapers and magazines whose participation in this project is essential are often businesses that have to worry about their bottom lines, and good journalism does need to be paid for. It just needs to be a price low enough that anyone can afford it.

All in all, an unlikely prospect, perhaps. That said, 10 years ago a prediction that millions of young people would pay for music and film online would have probably been laughed out of the room. We're sure that eventually someone will manage to do for journalism for Spotify and Netflix did for music and film. We just hope that whoever manages to pull it off remembers that at its best, journalism is more than just a product, it can be a public service too.

Fingers crossed.



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