Charleigh Carthy

The Method Behind Facebook Advertising

April 5, 2020

INTRODUCTION

In modern media, one cannot scroll far before an advertisement appears from some uncomfortably relevant vendor. It is often a joke among friends in the generation of technology that 'we are being listened to by advertisers', but to what degree is this true? In the simplest terms, advertisements on platforms like Facebook are targeted at users based on relatively public information like location, profiled interests, and personal demographics (i.e., sex, race, age, etc). Cambridge Analytica is a British political consulting firm that used advertising methods to harvest the personal data of millions of Facebook users without consent and used it for political advertising marketing strategies. The company used personal data to send out personalized advertisements for users to shape their beliefs and persuade them into buying/voting for something/someone.

Most advertisers fail to correctly target these commercials to their desired interest groups, and rather choose to utilize location to project broad marketing. Because carpet methods like this often do not reach their ideal reception, other companies turn to more refined forms of reaching their target audience by projecting advertisements based on connections, relationship status, language, education, and employment. With scandals emerging from Facebook during the 2016 presidential campaign and in March 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the conflict of private information being utilized for special interests came to light. Advertising on various social media platforms, but most specifically, Facebook, impacts commercialization, users' perception of politics, and their overall experience on social media. Facebook is not designed to

filter fake news, but should consider doing so before the next election before users get stuck in these filter bubbles.

Fake news on Facebook spreads like wildfire and within minutes hundreds of thousands, possibly even millions, of users may have seen that one article. Articles like these could persuade people into thinking a certain way about a political party, but also could get users stuck in a web of fake news, also known as a filter bubble, for users where fake news content re-appears on their feed due to the number of times the user has clicked on it. This is because the application/company believes the user likes this type of information and wants to create a better experience for them, but also possibly shape the users' beliefs. An article posted by Cornelle, talks about apps, like Twitter, that have many benefits to the way we connect as a society but also many disadvantages. One of those disadvantages is having the ability to post and use the information on the app to users disposable. One simple tweet can be seen by millions of people. On a democratic platform, such as Twitter, having users share and post news allows for misinformation to spread. The more we, users, click on information, the smaller and smaller our filter bubbles become, only getting the content that companies, such as Facebook, recognize we, the user, will enjoy and interact with. This is how Facebook was set up to give users a feed with their interests and similar posts.

TACTICS OF MARKETING; Under Cambridge Analytica

Digital Advertising is a data-driven advertising strategy to reach customers. Compared to traditional advertising, such as billboards or television broadcasting, digital advertising allows companies to adjust and improve their advertisements. Ways companies who use digital advertising tract their success is by tracking their CTR (click-through rate) to see what percentage of users click on their ad versus how many people scrolled past it.

Another tactic that is often in advertising, but used by political parties, especially during election campaign season, is micro-targeting. Micro-targeting is a "marketing strategy that uses consumer data and demographics to create audience subsets/segments"(Morris, I., 2019). Data that may be used would be who you are connected to, where you are located, what you have purchased in the past, and what interests you (Ghosh, D, 2018). A related marketing strategy is psychographic targeting. Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 election used psychographic targeting by using people's data, without consent, to group the users into smaller condensed groups.

Steve Bannon, a board member of Cambridge Analytica, believes the only way to rebuild society is to break it and rebuild it with the pieces you wanted. (Amer, K. & Noujaim, J (2019). The company was given permission to use Facebook data that also grabbed your Facebook friends' data. This also included private messages between users. Cambridge Analytic wanted to create a society, post shifting users' beliefs to fit the company's ideal world. The scary part was that the Facebook users had no clue Cambridge Analytica was using users' data that was handed

to them by Facebook and putting users into groups based on their interests. The book *"Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics"*, mentions that post the 2016 election Cambridge Analytica took credit for the crucial role they took in Trump's unexpected win. The company created psychological profiles for every possible American vote, and tailored pitches for each user (Detrow, S, 2018,). Cambridge Analytica would be able to predict what someone's actions would be based on their behavior on the web, especially while on Facebook. These profiles would allow the company to convince different users with different personalities to agree on a candidate, or an issue, by using targeted and personalized advertisements (Rathi, R, 2019). The company even stated that it "uses data to change audience behavior" (Bloomberg, 2018). These types of marketing strategies are used to shape customer/users' beliefs to shape and rebuild society to what the companies want us to be like.

HOW DOES CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA HARVEST DATA?

Cambridge Analytica had apps on Facebook, with special permission, to harvest data from not only the person who used the application but would also drive into the users' entire friend network and steal their data, and so on. This data would include status updates, private messages, likes, and interests. The company only needed a couple hundred thousand users to join the app to reach most of America. These users who did not even click the app information would have their information be stolen as well. The company spent millions of dollars harvesting all this data. Christopher Wylie, a previous data consultant at Cambridge Analytica, stated in an interview

with *The Guardian* that "the company itself [Cambridge Analytica] was founded on using

Facebook data". With this data the company would know what type of messaging users

would be more susceptible to how and where users would consume that, and how many times do

you need to see an ad to change the way you think. Wylie also stated that "it is a full-service

propaganda machine". Cambridge spread propaganda to support the cause of candidate Trump

and promote a political view. This caused users to see customized campaigns on their Facebook

feed. (Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H, 2018, p. 275).

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT POLITICS AND VOTING?

Filter Bubbles are created when internet users get information and opinions that reinforce

their beliefs. This is caused by algorithms that are personalized to the user's online profile. The

bubbles, also known as echo chambers, are dangerous because they allow people to become used

to hearing and seeing what they do. This may cause the viewer not to see any opposing

viewpoints, which could sway their opinion. An internet activist by the name of Eli Pariser,

states that these filtering algorithms do not show content that the user may disagree with,

therefore causing the filter bubbles to be biased. "Your filter bubble is your own personal,

unique universe of information that you live in online. And what's in your filter bubble depends

on who you are, and it depends on what you do. But the thing is that you don't decide what gets

in. And more importantly, you don't see what gets edited out." (Pariser, E., 2011 4:06).

While practicing scriptural inference to Google searches to this report it also implicates Google

in reaffirming individuals' prior beliefs. Those who participated in this study discredited the

importance of "doing their research" before believing any news coverage. While individuals search to expand from their ideological positions they may be unaware that they may be reaffirming their own beliefs depending on what phrase they choose to type into their search engine. The opportunity remains for future studies for researching our filter bubbles. (Tripodi, Francesca, 2018, p. 47).

During the 2016 election, there were concerns over the Facebook filter bubbles. These bubbles were formed to show users information based largely on their taste, somewhat similar to what Cambridge Analytica did by putting out campaigns based on the users' taste. This influences users' opinions on political parties because fake news is set up to do that. Fake news is created to deliberately misinform readers on politics. Americans want to believe what we want to hear, and according to a 2015 study "more than 60% of Facebook users are entirely unaware of any curation on Facebook at all" (Eslami, M. (2015), believing every news article on their feed. Filter bubbles are the user's universe to which they get information customized to them. Putting users in a world where they are not getting exposed to opposing viewpoints. (Keegan, J. 2016)

According to an article posted in *The Guardian,* fake news in the media and polarized politics may be the reason why Trump got elected president. During Trump's election period, there was a lot of misleading information about his candidacy. *The Guardian* did a little research on their own and reached out to their readers. Many readers stated that they saw this quote from a 1998 interview with Donald Trump posted in People's magazine on their Facebook feed. ; *"If I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They are the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'd still eat it up. I bet my*

numbers would be terrific.". This quote is something Trump never said but shows that fake news spreads on Facebook like wildfire. There is a thirteen-hour lag between fake news posted on Facebook and the company taking down the post. Between that time frame, hundreds of thousands of users may have seen that one post. Adam Mosseri, Facebook's former executive and current CEO of Instagram, said in 2017 that "False news is harmful to our community, it makes the world less informed, and it erodes trust"(Mosseri, 2017). Having fake news on Facebook feeds breaks trust between the company and users. This creates an unhealthy and unwanted environment for the user. Fake news on Facebook feeds can also trap the user into a fake news bubble, allowing them to share and interact with the information on the site. The company planned on creating new products to stop the spread of fake news through the application, and inform users when they encounter false information. Facebook found that most fake news articles are scammers who make money off of the number of clicks they get. (Schippers, D) The concept of this is to post hoaxes to get people to visit their site, therefore using clickbait as a type of advertisement.

Filter bubbles and interaction with fake news can contribute to political polarization. Some researchers believe that social networks, such as different social platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc), can cause an increase in different news articles, different ideas, which allows users to avoid isolated news patterns. Having different platforms with different information can allow users to explore their beliefs. "It's an argument worth considering deeply because it has long been believed that functioning democracies critically rely on voters who are exposed to and understand various political views." (Will social media, 2018). Three researchers

by the names of Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler believe that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, most Americans were exposed to more conservative information and created filter bubbles with just conservative material. These sites support Trump, so many users were constantly getting pro-Trump sites during this time. Another thing these researchers noticed was that Facebook users were more likely to consume fake news through the Facebook platform. Meaning, while users were scrolling through their feeds, they were being exposed to fake news on top of what they were being exposed to on other applications and sites. This research brought up concern for researchers about "what impact the filter bubble can have on the political process." (Will social media, 2018).

Mark Zuckerberg believes that Facebook is a technology company and not a media company. Zuckerberg says this because Facebook builds tools and Facebook itself does not produce content. "We exist to give you the tools to curate and have the experience that you want, to connect with the people and businesses and institutions in the world that you want." (D'Onfro, J., 2016), But according to CNN senior media correspondent, Brian Stelter, "a media company is a company that delivers information to users and profits by selling ads next to the information.". Facebook makes a profit from companies like Buzzfeed, Vox, New York Times to create content and post on users' Facebook feeds. These feeds are set up to be personalized to users based on what interests them, and previous clicks. This means that we consume content published by outside companies on their Facebook page, but also political content that is similar to our view without realizing it. Our filter bubbles eventually become an echo chamber where we see, discuss, and interact with users who have similar viewpoints as us.

WHY ARE WE ATTRACTED TO FAKE NEWS?

Fake news is created to do one of many things, including confusing the audience and tarnishing a political opponent's image in the media. After the 2016 election, A Pew Research Center conducted a study that found 64% of adults believe the fake news causes confusion and 23% reposted [also known as shared] political fake news on their feed (Anderson, J., & Rainie, L. , 2019) . This makes us question, what is so attractive about fake news that we click the link and what makes us believe the information shared on the site?

These are questions that social scientists and psychologists are looking into to prevent people from believing propaganda, but there is no current answer. Some researchers say that "our ability to reason is hijacked by our partisan convictions: that is, we're prone to rationalization. The other group — to which the two of us belong — claims that the problem is that we often fail to exercise our critical faculties: that is, we're mentally lazy." (Pennycook, G., & Rand, D., 2019). Researchers need to identify how big of a problem this is as a result of rationalization and how much of it is "laziness".

CONCLUSION

Advertising on various social media platforms, but most specifically, Facebook, impacts commercialization, users' perception of politics, and their overall experience on social media. Filter bubbles create a world for users where they see interest in them, and what they want to see. Eventually these bubbles create echo chambers and users no longer see products or articles that go against their beliefs. The algorithm for filter bubbles helps keep track of what the users

interact with, and gives them content based on what the application thinks they will enjoy. Without the user realizing, you begin to isolate yourself to opposing viewpoints. The application may hide posts from "friends" who may share information the algorithm believes you don't agree with. (Digital Media Literacy)

These filter bubbles are dangerous when it comes to elections because Facebook is set up so that users see what they want to see and what interests them. With the use of filter bubbles and Cambridge Analytica using users data, it was difficult for viewers not to see any opposing viewpoints. Exposing users to different content could have swayed their opinion during the voting stage. This is also known as micro-targeting and psychographic-targeting.

Due to the fact Facebook sees themselves as a technology company, instead of a media company, they give media companies a platform and tools to promote themselves. Facebook is an easy platform for fake news to spread like wildfire. Companies that want to post fake news can, and it will take about thirteen hours or so for Facebook or social media applications to take it down. This is plenty of them for the article to be shared hundreds of thousands of times, possibly even a million.

Facebook is not designed to filter fake news, but understanding how filter bubbles work could allow users to learn how to prevent getting stuck in an echo-chamber. This type of information is important because it allows companies to learn how to advertise to different users while understanding how algorithms work. What happened in 2016, could also be good knowledge for users to understand the benefits and cons of companies using their data.

Sources:

Allred, K. (2018, April 13). The Causes and Effects of "Filter Bubbles" and how to Break Free.
Retrieved from
https://medium.com/@10797952/the-causes-and-effects-of-filter-bubbles-and-how-to-break-free
-df6c5cbf919f

Anderson, J., & Rainie, L. (2019, December 31). The Future of Truth and Misinformation
Online. Retrieved from
https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: manipulation, disinformation,
and radicalization in American politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bloomberg. (2018, April 12). Facebook Cambridge Analytica Scandal: Here's What Happened.
Retrieved from https://fortune.com/2018/04/10/facebook-cambridge-analytica-what-happened/

Detrow, S. (2018, March 20). What Did Cambridge Analytica Do During The 2016 Election?
Retrieved from
https://www.npr.org/2018/03/20/595338116/what-did-cambridge-analytica-do-during-the-2016-e
lection

Digital Media Literacy: How Filter Bubbles Isolate You. (n.d.). Retrieved from
https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/digital-media-literacy/how-filter-bubbles-isolate-you/1/

D'Onfro, J. (2016, August 29). Facebook is telling the world it's not a media company, but it
might be too late. Retrieved from
https://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-on-facebook-being-a-media-company-2016-8

El-Bermawy, M. M. (2017, June 3). Your Filter Bubble is Destroying Democracy. Retrieved
from https://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/

Eslami, M. (2015). "I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her ... Retrieved from
http://www-personal.umich.edu/~csandvig/research/Eslami_Algorithms_CHI15.pdf

Ghosh, D. (2018, October 4). What is microtargeting and what is it doing in our politics?
Retrieved from
https://blog.mozilla.org/internetcitizen/2018/10/04/microtargeting-dipayan-ghosh/

Hern, A. (2017, May 22). How social media filter bubbles and algorithms influence the election.
Retrieved from
https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/22/social-media-election-facebook-filter-bu
bbles

Keegan, J. (2016, May 18). Blue feed, red feed. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from
http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/

Kos, P., Dreyfous, G. & Korin, J.   (Producer), & Amer, K. & Noujaim, J (Director). (January 26,
2019). *The Great Hack* [Sundance]. United States .

Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., & Matsa, K. E. (2019, December 31). Facebook Top Source for
Political News Among Millennials. Retrieved from
https://www.journalism.org/2015/06/01/facebook-top-source-for-political-news-among-millennia
ls/

Morris, I. (2019, August 13). What is Micro-Targeting? Retrieved from
https://www.mni.com/blog/advertmarket/what-is-micro-targeting/article_a12cbac0-137c-11e9-84
d4-73b6685fa60c.html

Mosseri, A. (2017, April 7). Working to Stop Misinformation and False News. Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news

"Networks." "Fake News" Spreading like Wildfire as a Result of Information Cascades :
Networks Course Blog for INFO 2040/CS 2850/Econ 2040/SOC 2090,
https://blogs.cornell.edu/info2040/2018/10/28/fake-news-spreading-like-wildfire-as-a-result-of-i
nformation-cascades/

Pariser, E. (2011, May 2), from
https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles/up-next

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. (2019, January 19). Why Do People Fall for Fake News? Retrieved
from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/19/opinion/sunday/fake-news.html

14

Rathi, R. (2019, January 13). Effect of Cambridge Analytica's Facebook ads on the 2016 US
Presidential Election. Retrieved from
https://towardsdatascience.com/effect-of-cambridge-analyticas-facebook-ads-on-the-2016-us-pre
sidential-election-dacb5462155d

Richterich, A. (2018, November 14). How Data-Driven Research Fuelled the Cambridge
Analytica Controversy. Retrieved from
https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/en/publications/how-data-driven-research-fuelled-the-cambrid
ge-analytica-controve

Schippers, D. (n.d.). 4 Common Facebook Scams and How to Avoid Them. Retrieved from
https://www.walshcollege.edu/blog/facebook-scams-blog

Tripodi, Francesca. 2018. "Searching for Alternative Facts." Data & Society. Retrieved March
26, 2019 (https://datasociety.net/output/searching-for-alternative-facts/). (Page 47).

What Is Digital Advertising? (Your Digital Ad Handbook),
www.webfx.com/internet-marketing/digital-advertising.html

Will social media usage lead to political polarization through filter bubbles ? . (2018, December
2). Retrieved from
https://sites.bu.edu/cmcs/2018/12/02/will-social-media-usage-lead-to-political-polarization-throu
gh-filter-bubbles ? /