THE CROSSROADS AND CONVERGENCES OF MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES: FACEBOOK AS THE LATEST MEDIA GATEKEEPER

THE SOAS JOURNAL OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Author: Karishma Mehrotra

Department/Centre: Centre for Global Media and Communications

THE CROSSROADS AND CONVERGENCES OF MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES: FACEBOOK AS THE LATEST MEDIA GATEKEEPER

Karishma Mehrotra
643988@soas.ac.uk
Centre for Global Media and Communications

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I will argue that the news *distributors* of today —technology companies, their algorithms and their editorial practices— are the new gatekeepers in the sphere of media. Previously reserved to a privileged few, content creation now errs on the side of a 'human right' in the age of the 'writing public'.[1] Media researchers have revised gatekeeping theory, falling prey to the historically constructed myth of the technological utopia and obscuring new powerful actors in the media-technological world. We must not be blind to how knowledge dissemination —now disassociated from the activities of *production*— on the Internet is controlled by content distributors, redactors and selectors. The employees of these companies and their news feed algorithms are not objective forces of nature. Specific to today's current media salience, the social network companies that distribute media content have power over discourse and the capability to shape our realities —phenomena we have primarily attributed to news producers in the newsroom. My case study is an almost too perfect archetype for this hybrid media-tech gatekeeper: Facebook, whose increasingly exposed split personality is destabilising its claims of being a strictly 'technology' company. Concurrent to these public debates, media studies researchers must begin to shift their definition of 'media' and analyse the blurring lines between 'media' and 'tech'.

---

[1] Hartley, John, "Journalism as a Human Right: The Cultural Approach to Journalism", *Global Journalism Research: Theories, Methods, Findings, Future*, 2008, Accessed February 08, 2017, http://eprints.qut.edu.au/13331/.

In August 2016, an audience member asked Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg if he intended to be a news editor. Zuckerberg responded by saying that Facebook could not possibly be considered a media company. After all, it doesn't produce any content.[2] Digital technology has dethroned news *production* centres as the only locus of media control. In this essay, I will argue that a new gatekeeper in the sphere of media consists in the news *distributors* of today —technology companies, their algorithms and their editorial practices. I will merge both literature about media (specifically gatekeeping theory) and literature about technology to expose how social network companies and their dissemination activities are powerful *media* actors in the construction of reality. My claims are that firstly, social network companies are powerful media actors, and secondly, media studies research must analyse the new blurred lines between media and technology. These aim to combat the media theorists who assume that the Internet restores power to the audience, and overlook the gatekeeping role of technology distributors.

Previously reserved to a privileged few, content creation now errs on the side of a 'human right' in the age of the 'writing public'.[3] In awe of this mass explosion of content production agency, media researchers have revised gatekeeping theory to proclaim the mythic utopia of a completely connected digital world. Quick to romanticise the Internet, they believe agency has been restored to empowered masses.[4] These pronouncements fall prey to the historically constructed concept of the technological utopia and its mystification of new powerful actors in the media-technological world. We must not be blind to how knowledge dissemination — now disassociated from the activities of *production*— on the Internet is controlled by content distributors, redactors and selectors. The employees of these companies and their news feed algorithms are not objective forces of nature. Specific to today's current media moment, the social network companies that distribute media content have power over discourse and the capability to shape our realities —phenomena we have primarily attributed to news producers in the newsroom. My case study is an almost too-perfect archetype for this hybrid media-tech gatekeeper, Facebook, whose increasingly exposed split personality is destabilising its claims to be a strictly 'technology' company. The company now faces a crossroads between Silicon Valley's values of open and free technology and media's constrictions of journalistic standards and obligations. Concurrent to these public debates, media studies research must begin to shift their definition of 'media' and analyse the blurring lines between 'media' and 'tech'.

GATEKEEPING THEORY AND JOURNALISM

Kurt Lewin brought about the concept of gatekeeping as a study of persons in 'key positions' along 'social channels' where 'desire and the resistance to change are expressed'.[5] To apply gatekeeping theory, Lewin determined that 'one must identify those in control of the

---

[2] Segreti, Giulia, "Facebook CEO Says Group Will Not Become a Media Company", Reuters. August 29, 2016, http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-zuckerberg-idUKKCN1141WN.

[3] Hartley, "Journalism as a Human Right: The Cultural Approach to Journalism".

[4] Bruns, Axel, *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*, New York: P. Lang, 2009.

[5] Serban, Silviu, "On the Origin of the Gatekeeping Theory and Its Application to Journalism", *Journalism Studies* 16.2 (2015): 13.

entrance and exit [of the channel] and must study the psychology of the gatekeepers, their system of values and beliefs that causes the decisions related to the traffic through each channel'.[6] Silviu Serban applied Lewin's theory to the realm of journalism and established two main principles: 1) there are infinite events in the world, and 2) the press only has a limited capacity to reflect these events.[7] Consequently, the consistent source of power in the media industry is control over news selection, not news production. Serban argues that we cannot overlook seemingly objective processes, such as news selection and their subjective qualities.[8] The controllers of news selection have shifted with the changing face of gatekeepers in the journalism realm: from the wire editor to the press associations to the newspaper owners.[9] The technological era has ushered in a new face to the news selector, but previous attempts to apply gatekeeping theory to the Internet's impact on the media have not appropriately pinpointed the emerging gatekeeper. Rather, theorists assume that full agency is restored to the audience premised on a false idea of a completely connected network.[10]

Media gatekeeping theory applications in the contemporary era

With the introduction of the Internet, many theorists have mistakenly championed the end of gatekeeping in journalism. John Hartley imagines a 'shift in the "value chain" of meanings, where what was accepted socially as the source of meaning –and thence legitimacy– has drifted from author (mediaeval), via text (modern), to consumer (now) … now, meaning is sourced to popular readerships or audiences, and is determined by the plebiscite'.[11] The craze of citizen journalism, of '"many to many" communication', and of the writing public has convinced researchers to swing the pendulum of audience agency, assuming that the spread of production capabilities renders communication uncontrolled and anti-hierarchal.

Hartley and others, however, did signal potential new phenomena of gatekeeping in this presumed egalitarian and anti-hierarchal landscape. Hartley highlights the importance of a new form of editing called 'redaction'. Journalism as a profession, he finds, will now primarily involve sifting existing data and producing a digestible form of that data, rather than producing new information.[12] 'Editorial practices are required to make the potentially overwhelming and chaotic possibilities of such plenitude into coherent packages for users.[13] In fact, the entire 'public utility and commercial future of journalism,' Hartley argues, rests

---

[6] Ibid, 14.

[7] Ibid, 12.

[8] Ibid, 15.

[9] Ibid, 12.

[10] Bruns, *Gatewatching*.

[11] Hartley, "Journalism as a Human Right", 18.

[12] Ibid, 19.

[13] Ibid, 18.

on 'choosing, editing and customizing existing information for different consumers'.[14] Hartley is correct to consider a shifting definition in the profession of journalism, but fails to discover the new player that fits this definition. In his acknowledgement of redaction potential with the platform Google News, he obliviously labels the algorithm that produces such newsgathering as 'not a journalist but a sort of automated plebiscite'.[15] By equating an algorithm with the 'plebiscite' he fails to appropriately transfer responsibility to the *human* actors in control of the algorithmic process —a point that will be stressed throughout the essay.

Axel Bruns is another media researcher who hints at new gatekeeping positions in the Internet age but fails to target the technological actors in those positions. In *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production,* Bruns mimics Hartley's 'redaction' role with the analogy of a librarian, who is in control of 'storage and cataloguing'.[16] Using the words of Anthony Smith, Bruns describes 'the librarian or the librarian's *computerized successor*' as a 'crucial guardian of knowledge'.[17] Bruns uses the term 'gate-watching' rather than 'gatekeeping' to describe a shift from publishing content to *'publicizing* relevant content'.[18] Contrasting to traditional journalism gatekeepers, Bruns envisions that librarians 'assist' users by screening as much information as possible to point users in the right direction, rather than 'spoon-feed[ing]' users.[19] An example of Bruns' librarian is news syndication, or what he defines as the 'automated exchange of the latest news stories'.[20] Previously, this process relied on journalists acting as the middleman to provide breaking news, especially through wire stories. Now, the audience supposedly has 'direct access' to syndicated news sources, thanks to the 'networked structure of the Internet which enables the easy and effective exchange of news items'.[21] Bruns draws on the words of Lasica: syndication 'turns your computer into a voracious media hub, letting you snag headlines and news updates as if you were commanding the anchor desk at CNN'.[22] In this depiction of the Internet, the audience is 'in control' of selecting from the 'incoming syndication stream'.[23] 'The Internet and the new communication technologies are breaking the corporate stranglehold on journalism and opening an unprecedented era of interactive democratic media'.[24]

By overlooking potential distortion in syndication or redaction, Bruns and Hartley espouse that agency is restored to the audiences in an unaltered transmission of news throughout an egalitarian network. They believe 'news audiences have begun to reclaim

---

[14] Hartley, John, "The Frequencies of Public Writing: Tomb, Tome, and Time as Technologies of the Public", *Democracy and New Media*, 2003, 83.

[15] Hartley, "Journalism as a Human Right", 19.

[16] Bruns, *Gatewatching*.

[17] Ibid, 15.

[18] Ibid, 9.

[19] Ibid, 15.

[20] Ibid, 239.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid, 240.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid, 5.

their place in the news cycle'.[25]. 'Participatory journalism' and a 'multifaceted, multiperspectival coverage of news events' leads to Bruns' notion of a 'collaborative online news production'.[26] In David DeIuliis' application of gatekeeping to the modern digital world, he also argues that audience agency is channelled through Twitter feeds and Facebook posts, leading to a more open and diverse exchange of knowledge.[27] 'Facebook users make choices about what information to add, withhold and disregard, and how to shape, localise and manipulate the information they channel through their profile'.[28] Again, Facebook users are assumed to be the gatekeepers, ignoring the actors in control of the algorithm that disseminates the information that users produce. Any gatekeepers that do exist in DeIuliis' vision of the Internet are amongst the users themselves; he argues that the gated on Twitter are the average Twitter users, while the gatekeepers are the 12 most popular Twitter users —not Twitter itself.[29]

Hartley is mistaken to believe that redaction is now controlled by an 'automated plebiscite', Bruns is naïve in his image of a less-controlling librarian, and DeIuliis overlooks the social media company in his image of empowered social media users. The three ultimately obscure the subjective qualities of the redactor, the librarian and the disseminator. Their mistake is not completely of their own making; it traces back to historical developments in the creation of the concept of 'technology'[30] and the Silicon Valley's internalised utopian façade. Bruns himself exposes that he has internalised this technological myth in his own research:

> [G]atewatching builds on the commonplace assumption that the Web (and the Net) is an egalitarian, open-access medium which is particularly well suited to liberating the exchange of alternative, non-mainstream content and ideas ... the idea of gatewatching is inspired by the view that the Net inherently routes around any obstructions to the free flow of information—such as editorial interventions and access restrictions.[31]

How did this assumption become 'commonplace' enough for Bruns to believe it as unquestionably true? When did technology and progress become synonymous in our imagination?

THE CREATION OF THE IMAGINED INTERNET UTOPIA

The presumed correlation between technology and social good has a historical trajectory. Leo Marx marks the beginnings of this intertwining with the opening of the railroads and the

---

[25] Ibid, 9.

[26] Ibid, 2.

[27] DeIuliis, David, "Gatekeeping Theory from Social Fields to Social Networks", *Gatekeeping Theory from Social Fields to Social Networks* 34.1 (2015): 10-20.

[28] Ibid, 18.

[29] Ibid, 17.

[30] Winner, Langdon, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 121, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024652.

[31] Bruns, *Gatewatching,* 3.

emergence of the 'perceived relation between innovations in science, the mechanic arts and the prevailing belief in progress.'[32] The idea of progress became 'modernity's nearest secular equivalents of the creation myths that embody the belief systems of premodern culture'.[33] Langdon Winner argues that every moment of hyper-technological change brings about repetitive optimistic and deterministic sentiments. The factory system, the space program and the automobile were all purported to be 'democratizing, liberating force[s]'.[34] 'Every time a technology comes along, repeatedly we project our hopes for society … We look to technology to liberate us', according to Berkeley professor Paul Duguid.[35] These, Duguid says, are based on 'unassailable assumptions [that] technologies are inherently good and technology will promote their inherently good ends'.[36]

The modern-day technology centre, the Silicon Valley, has seamlessly adopted and embraced the age-old myth. The industry's birth came about during the 1960s counterculture movement, intertwining its goal of progress with the anti-authority and egalitarian thought of the moment.[37] During the industry's early development, Stewart Brand spread the misleading notion 'Information wants to be free', imagined digital technologies to be 'tools of liberation', and signalled the rise of 'digital utopianism'.[38] In applying this utopianism to the Internet, the creation of the World Wide Web promised a space where everyone had a voice. In the 1969 *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,* the author proclaims: '[w]e are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity'.[39] There is no authoritative control on the Internet, according to the supposition of these technology optimists.

At the core of this faith is the assumption that unmitigated connectivity can combat governmental overreach and other world problems. Steven Johnson, in *Future Perfect: The Code for Progress in a Networked Age,* argues that 'peer progressivism' will harness collective power and decentralised interconnectivity, leading to a 'liquid democracy' where citizen journalists on social media completely upend the political system.[40] Facebook's Zuckerberg has continuously adopted similar paradigms but takes the extreme utopianism even further. In 2008, Zuckerberg suggested that his social network could help end terrorism by allowing extremists to broaden their view. "It's not out of a deep hatred of anyone," the Facebook

---

[32] Marx, Leo, "Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept", *Technology and Culture* 51, no. 3 (2010): 561-77, doi:10.1353/tech.2010.0009.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Winner, *Do Artifacts Have Politics*.

[35] "Information and Liberation", YouTube, November 10, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdwp6xN-T2U.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Turner, Fred, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Chicago: U of Chicago, 2006.

[38] Ibid, 254.

[39] Barlow, John Perry, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace", Electronic Frontier Foundational January 22, 2016, https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

[40] Johnson, Steven, *Future Perfect: The Case for Progress in a Networked Age*, London: Penguin Books, 2013.

CEO said. "It comes from a lack of connectedness, a lack of communication, a lack of empathy, and a lack of understanding".[41]

The lack of nuance and the zeal for technology as a panacea to the world's problems is rife throughout the Valley. In *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, entrepreneur Peter Thiel defines technology as 'any new and better way of doing this'.[42] 'Humans are distinguished from other species by our ability to work miracles', Thiel states. 'We call these miracles technology'.[43] Technological innovations are not god-sent miracles and doing things a 'better way' is not a feature inherent to technological systems. In this definition, Thiel ignores that the 'better way' must be decided upon through the value judgments of a human actor creating the technology. Similarly, media research's belief in technology's inherent progress is blind to to the fact that the Internet is not a network with complete audience agency, but,rather, is controlled by human actors and their dissemination products. To understand how the human actors behind the screen of technology came to be objectified and faceless, we must return to the concept of 'technology'.

THE INVISIBLE POWERS BEHIND THE FAÇADE OF THE INTERNET UTOPIA

As the concept took on its supposedly progressive mask, 'technology' also worked to obscure the subjective qualities of its creation. Marx argues that 'technology' went from defining purely mechanical items to referring to an entire system that intersects with social and political phenomena. The 'sociotechnological system['s]' linguistic void was filled 'by the relatively abstract, indeterminate, neutral, synthetic-sounding term *technology*'.[44] What this word has done, Marx argues, is mask its non-artifactual, social component with 'an objective, autonomous character'.[45] (Note the parallel discovery made by Serban about how journalists' philosophical attachment to objectivity masks the subjective nature of news selection).[46]

> The chief hazard attributable to the concept of technology, as currently used, is the mystification, passivity, and fatalism it helps to engender. [It] serves as a surrogate agent, as well as a mask, for the human actors actually responsible for the developments in question.[47]

Before Marx's analysis, Winner made similar cautions about the hazardous concept of 'technology': '[M]achines, structures, and systems of modern material culture can be accurately judged not only for their contributions of efficiency and productivity … but also

---

[41] Packer, George, "Change the World", The New Yorker, January 08, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/27/change-the-world.

[42] Thiel and Masters, *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, London: Virgin Books, 2015.

[43] Ibid, 2.

[44] Marx, "Technology", 978.

[45] Ibid, 982.

[46] Serban, *On the Origin*.

[47] Marx, "Technology", 984.

for the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority'.[48] In Winner's theory of 'technological politics', man-made systems embody certain kinds of political relationships.[49] Technological innovations and innovators —just like 'legislative acts or political foundings' and their authors— establish 'a public order that will endure over many generations'.[50] Almost four decades later, University of California, Berkeley professor Paul Duguid is now making the same comparison. In a relevant lecture given at Berkeley, he argues that software code is not too different from legal code because of major technology companies' ability to use code to 'prescribe and limit and control people's behavior'.[51] 'Technologists are becoming unacknowledged legislators of the world', Duguid argues.

The belief in technology as a sure-route to progress and the associated objectification of the human decision-making behind the screen of technology has led us to believe the Internet is a completed connected network where the audience holds the power. However, I will show how in reality technology companies control the dissemination of information on this network.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CONSTRUCTING HYPER-REALITIES

Media research has understood that a recent power changeover has taken place, where traditional news media's impact is diffused through new 'information delivery conduits'.[52] This is no longer considered a discovery, but rather a starting point.[53] Social networks are the vital structure through which journalism is rendered meaningful by users.[54] In 2010, the Pew Research Centre found that 75 percent of people who read the news online consume it through social networks.[55] Out of all the time humans spend on the Internet, 22 percent is spent on social networking sites. Siapera, Papadopoulou and Archontakis[56] argue that 'if the advent of the Internet did not undermine the existing media system and journalism, then the rise of social media surely did'. In a short time, Facebook monopolised the social media arena, becoming the second most popular website after Google in 2011 with over 500 million users —one out of every 13 people on the planet.[57] As journalist Joshua Benton at the Nieman

---

[48] Winner, *Do Artifacts Have Politics*, 121.

[49] Ibid, 123.

[50] Ibis, 128.

[51] "Information and Liberation".

[52] Heikkilä, Heikki, and Laura Ahva, "The Relevance of Journalism", *Journalism Practice* 9, no. 1 (2014): 54, doi:10.1080/17512786.2014.928465.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid, 50.

[55] DeIuliis, *Gatekeeping,* 15.

[56] Siapera, Eugenia, Lambrini Papadopoulou, and Fragiskos Archontakis, "Post-Crisis Journalism", *Journalism Studies*, 2014, 445-65.

[57] Curran, John, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman, "Misunderstanding the Internet", *Journal of Information Policy* 2, 2012, 123, doi:10.4324/9780203146484.

Lab contends, 'Facebook's algorithm is central to how news & information is consumed in the world today, and no historian will write about 2016 without it'.[58]

This algorithm, as we have seen in our discussion of technological reification, is not an objective, unchangeable force that hands over all agency to the audience. James Curran, in countering media enthusiasts, describes how news consumption through social media actually limits the users' ability to decipher accurate information through all the noise.[59] Because social network exchange is driven by communication and not information, producers are motivated to share a version of themselves, not information that they deem to be accurate.[60] Simultaneously, consumers are gratified by passive 'news snacking' rather than active news consumption, allowing the exchange to be controlled by corporate media and network operators who make the decisions about how reality is presented to the audience.[61] Curran is sceptical of these actors: 'How do Google and Microsoft prioritise certain tweets over others. Do they have democratic intent as their ambition, or profit from advertising as their purpose?'.[62]

As technology companies take on the powerful role of media dissemination, they circumscribe a *version* of reality, instead of giving audiences direct access to the information.[63] For example, Google Search orders the world of knowledge for us, stripping us of the power to actively organise available information. Netflix curates our tastes, Yelp locks us only into the food that others have enjoyed, and Facebook binds us to a predetermined list of the news and events. The phenomenon is similar to what the Italian essayist Umberto Eco labelled 'hyper-realities', with his example of Disneyland —a 'place of total passivity' whose users 'must agree to behave like its robots' with no 'individual initiative'.[64] Instead, visitors accept the 'reconstructed truth' so they no longer 'feel any need for the original'.[65] In eliminating human exertion, these social networks also begin to snatch agency. As Siva Vaidhyanathan states in *The Googlization of Everything*, 'The structure and order of the choices offered to us profoundly influence the decisions we make … Celebrating freedom and autonomy is one of the great rhetorical ploys of the global information economy'.[66] Our fantasy of communication freedom obscures real power structures:

> Networks are not inherently liberatory; network openness does not lead us directly
> to democracy … we must avoid assum[ing] the existence of a framework of politics
> in which in principle every voice could be heard, without giving attention to the very

---

[58] Buni, Catherine, "Facebook Won't Call Itself a Media Company. Is It Time to Reimagine Journalism for the Digital Age?" The Verge, November 16, 2016, http://www.theverge.com/2016/11/16/13655102/facebook-journalism-ethics-media-company-algorithm-tax.

[59] Curran, "Misunderstanding", 131.

[60] Ibid, 130.

[61] Ibid, 125-28.

[62] Ibid, 138.

[63] Ibid, 125-28.

[64] Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays*. San Diego: Harcourt, 2002: 48.

[65] Ibid, 48, 19.

[66] Vaidhyanathan, Siva, *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012: 89.

structuring of those frameworks and the ways in which the visibility of subjects is structured.[67]

If we decide to hold technology companies accountable for their software code and their decisions, we must take Lewin's direction and analyse the new gatekeepers' 'psychology'. Today, one of the most significant pieces of software code controlling news selection and distribution is the algorithm that curates every individual Facebook newsfeed. The new gatekeepers are the employees who build this code and make the editorial decisions at this hybrid media-technology company.

FACEBOOK FRATERNISES WITH THE LABEL OF MEDIA COMPANY

Not surprisingly, Facebook initially resisted any acknowledgement of their power to construct reality by professing that news disseminators are protected from the liabilities of being a news producer. Last year, Facebook repeatedly described its role as a technology company, not a media company. "We define ourselves as a technology company", Facebook's product chief Chris Cox said at the WSJDLive conference in California. "A media company is about the stories it tells. A technology company is about the tools it builds".[68] Zuckerberg has exposed such ideas before: "When you think about a media company, you have people who are producing content, who are editing content, that's not us. We're a technology company. We build tools. We do not produce any of the content".[69] Technology news reports also struggle with Facebook's ambiguous new terrain, calling the company everything from 'a major player in the media universe' to 'a strange new class of media outlet'.[70] Even after the barrage of criticism about the social network's influence on the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Zuckerberg found the notion that Facebook held any responsibility "crazy". "Voters make decisions based on their lived experience", he said at a Techonomy conference near San Francisco.[71] Because Zuckerberg does not have the media literature foundations to contextualise his product, he fails to see how our lived experience is 'framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media'.[72]

The company has many reasons to resist a change in definition. One is that technology companies are usually valued at higher prices than media companies.[73] More importantly, though, Facebook is avoiding legal responsibility for the content it distributes. The Communications Decency Act's Section 230(c), or the Good Samaritan act of 1996, protects computer service providers from being labelled the publisher of the content its users'

---

[67] Curran, "Misunderstanding the Internet", 142.

[68] Guynn, Jessica, "Facebook: Don't Call Us a Media Company", USA Today. October 25, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/10/25/facebook-says-its-not-a-media-company/92744614/.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Buni, "Facebook Won't Call Itself a Media Company".

[71] Solon, Olivia, "Facebook's Fake News: Mark Zuckerberg Rejects 'Crazy Idea' that It Swayed Voters", The Guardian, November 10, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-us-election-mark-zuckerberg-donald-trump.

[72] Deuze, Mark, *Media Work*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011: 13.

[73] Buni, "Facebook Won't Call Itself a Media Company".

provide. As one of the 'most important law[s] on the Internet', the provision immunises social media platforms from liability and distances them from the responsibility that traditional media companies face for their content.[74] This resistance to liability is not much different from the journalist's philosophical claim to objectivity. Similar to the way in which the 1996 act protects technology companies from being responsible from content written on their platforms, reporters use quotation marks as a 'signalling practice' to obscure their subjectivity in a story.[75] Journalists falsely distance themselves from their sources and their story as a 'strategic ritual protecting [them] from the risks of their trade'.[76] Just as reporters have a 'limited repertoire with which to define and defend their objectivity', computer software engineers cannot hide under the veil of algorithmic objectivity to deflect subjectivities in their product.[77]

As Facebook's power on the Internet has grown, however, its veil is weakening. By December 2016, it seemed that Zuckerberg was changing his company's public presence:

> Facebook is a new kind of platform … I think of Facebook as a technology company, but I recognize we have a greater responsibility than just building technology that information flows through. While we don't write the news stories you read and share, we also recognize we're more than just a distributor of news. We're a new kind of platform for public discourse —and that means we have a new kind of responsibility to enable people to have the most meaningful conversations, and to build a space where people can be informed.[78]

Realistically, Facebook will not be describing itself as a media company anytime soon. But media studies should not fall for the trap. How does Facebook act like a media gatekeeper? What news values do its algorithm and its leaders abide by? When do we see significant moments of editorial control at this company?

FACEBOOK AS A MEDIA GATEKEEPER

While the inner workings of Facebook's algorithms are not public knowledge (another issue if we are to begin conceptualising the company as a media company), we can surmise much of its workings and apply some of Galtung and Ruge's 12 news factors to the company's selection process. For one, similar to traditional news selection, Facebook gives higher importance to culturally proximate and relevant events. Other news values, however, are probably ignored, including what Galtung and Ruge call 'composition', or the ideal diversity in news coverage that upgrades certain events despite their insufficiencies in other

---

[74] Ibid.

[75] Tuchman, Gaye, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity", *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 660-768, doi:10.1086/225193.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Constine, Josh, "Zuckerberg Implies Facebook Is a Media Company, Just 'Not a Traditional Media Company'", TechCrunch, December 21, 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/21/fbonc/.

categories.[79] Harcup and O'Neill's more contemporary, revised list of news values may be more applicable to the algorithm's priorities, with the inclusion of entertainment and photo opportunities (and, even more appropriately in the modern moment, video opportunities).[80]

The company's algorithm, however, is not the only component of the new media gatekeeper. Its leaders have continuously made decisions of editorial nature, leading to even more visibly blurring lines between media and tech. In October 2017, the company decided to allow more types of graphic or offensive content if it is deemed 'newsworthy' or ;important to the public interest'.[81] In September, the company came under flack for censoring the iconic 1972 photo of the naked young girl fleeing napalm bombs during the Vietnam War.[82] After reposting the article, a company statement stated: 'In this case, we recognize the history and global importance of this image in documenting a particular moment in time'.[83] Previous moments of media decision-making include the company's change in community standards after it blocked photos of women breast-feeding. The platform also removed a photo of a plus-sise model because it was 'undesirable' and later reposted the photo.[84]

The company has also oscillated between algorithmic decision-making and direct human interference, showcasing the inevitable integration of bias with this dual-component news editor. One of the most illuminating Facebook controversies centred on allegations that its Trending Topics section, managed by human editors at the time, was purposefully suppressing conservative news.[85] Afterwards, Facebook eliminated the human desk and left the trending selection to an algorithm, which consequently pushed out a false story about Fox News host Megyn Kelly and links to an article with a video of a man masturbating with a McDonald's sandwich.[86] Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Facebook has begun new efforts to limit 'fake' news from its algorithm feeds. Facebook will send the most popular potentially fake news stories to five news organisations who will then use Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network code of principles to assess if the flagged articles are

---

[79] Harcup, Tony, and Deirdre O'neill, "What Is News? Galtung and Ruge revisited", *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 274, doi:10.1080/14616700120042114.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Bell, Karissa, "Facebook Is about to Become More NSFW", Mashable, October 21, 2016, http://mashable.com/2016/10/21/facebook-reducing-censorship/.

[82] Isaac, Mark Scott and Mike, "Facebook Restores Iconic Vietnam War Photo It Censored for Nudity". The New York Times, September 09, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/technology/facebook-vietnam-war-photo-nudity.html?_r=0.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Hunt, Elle, "Facebook to Change Trending Topics after Investigation into Bias Claims", The Guardian. May 23, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/24/facebook-changes-trending-topics-anti-conservative-bias.

[86] Thielman, Sam, "Facebook Fires Trending Team, and Algorithm without Humans Goes Crazy", The Guardian, August 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/29/facebook-fires-trending-topics-team-algorithm.

fake.[87] Facebook may not want to call itself a media company so that it doesn't have to be held liable for issues of free speech, censorship and journalistic integrity, but the company is already delving deep into the editorial and ethical conundrums most commonly contained in media newsrooms. While Facebook leaders make these decisions of media import, we must not be blind to the social responsibility that comes with being a media gatekeeper and a constructor of reality. Once we accept the company's new hybrid definition as a technology and media company, we can begin to evaluate the news and media values it espouses.

CONCLUSION

Academics must begin to apply foundational gatekeeper theories to a new set of actors: the media distributors. Facebook's algorithm and the company's employees who veto or censor content and write the standards and policies are replacing Mr. White as the modern-day news editor. Consequently, questions of reality and meaning construction are still important but must be refocused.

Facebook, like all technology companies, may become a thing of the past one day. But the issues of news selection and news distribution in an age of widespread news production will continue to be salient in the Internet age. As technology ebbs and flows, media research must keep its eye on who controls the reality presented to the public, especially when technology has taken on the character of an objective and inherently good middleman. To be sure, I do not mean to argue that the Internet has given no newfound agency to the audience. Rather, I aim to refute those who claim that all agency is restored to the Internet user, ultimately because they underestimate the rising power of the news distributor in the media landscape. Those who do so fall victim to the Silicon Valley imagination of an Internet utopia described by an egalitarian network and complete connectivity. In reality, our channels for connections are themselves the products of powerful actors. The collaboration and connection of the Internet has the potential to advance society. But just how society should seek the Truth out of this new system remains an unresolved conundrum in the new age.

---

[87] Constine, Josh, "Facebook Now Flags and Down-Ranks Fake News with Help from Outside Fact Checkers", TechCrunch, https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/15/facebook-now-flags-and-down-ranks-fake-news-with-help-from-outside-fact-checkers/.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Herman, Edward S. "The Propaganda Model Revisited." *Monthly Review* 48, no. 3 (1996): 115, doi:10.14452/mr-048-03-1996-07_8.

Barlow, John Perry. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." Electronic Frontier Foundation, January 22, 2016, https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

Bell, Karissa. "Facebook Is about to Become More NSFW." *Mashable*, October 21, 2016, http://mashable.com/2016/10/21/facebook-reducing-censorship/.

Bruns, Axel. *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: P. Lang, 2005.

Buni, Catherine. "Facebook Won't Call Itself a Media Company. Is It Time to Reimagine Journalism for The Digital Age?" *The Verge*, November 16, 2016, http://www.theverge.com/2016/11/16/13655102/facebook-journalism-ethics-media-company-algorithm-tax.

Constine, Josh. "Facebook Now Flags and Down-Ranks Fake News with Help from Outside Fact Checkers." *TechCrunch*, https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/15/facebook-now-flags-and-down-ranks-fake-news-with-help-from-outside-fact-checkers/.

Constine, Josh. "Zuckerberg Implies Facebook Is a Media Company, Just 'Not a Traditional Media Company.'" *TechCrunch*, December 21, 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/21/fbonc/.

Curran, John, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman. "Misunderstanding the Internet." *Journal of Information Policy* 2, 2012, 123, doi:10.4324/9780203146484.

DeIuliis, David. "Gatekeeping Theory from Social Fields to Social Networks." *Gatekeeping Theory from Social Fields to Social Networks* 34.1 (2015): 10-20.

Deuze, Mark. *Media Work*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011.

Gibbs, Samuel. "Mark Zuckerberg Appears to Finally Admit Facebook is a Media Company." *The Guardian*, December 22, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/22/mark-zuckerberg-appears-to-finally-admit-facebook-is-a-media-company.

Guynn, Jessica. "Facebook: Don't Call us a Media Company." *USA Today*, October 25, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/10/25/facebook-says-its-not-a-media-company/92744614/.

Harcup, Tony, and Deirdre O'Neill. "What Is News? Galtung and Ruge revisited." *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 274, doi:10.1080/14616700120042114.

Hartley, John. "The Frequencies of Public Writing: Tomb, Tome, and Time as Technologies of the Public." *Democracy and New Media*, 2003, 83.

Hartley, John. "Journalism as a Human Right: The Cultural Approach to Journalism." *Global Journalism Research: Theories, Methods, Findings, Future*, 2008, http://eprints.qut.edu.au/13331/.

Heikkilä, Heikki, and Laura Ahva. "The Relevance of Journalism." *Journalism Practice* 9, no. 1 (2014): 50-64, doi:10.1080/17512786.2014.928465.

"Information and Liberation." YouTube, November 10, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdwp6xN-T2U.

Ingram, Mathew. "Sorry Mark Zuckerberg, But Facebook Is Definitely a Media Company." *Fortune.com*, August 30, 2016, http://fortune.com/2016/08/30/facebook-media-company/.

Isaac, Mark Scott and Mike. "Facebook Restores Iconic Vietnam War Photo It Censored for Nudity." *The New York Times*, September 09, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/technology/facebook-vietnam-war-photo-nudity.html?_r=0.

Johnson, Steven. *Future Perfect: The Case for Progress in a Networked Age*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays*. San Diego: Harcourt, 2002.

Marx, Leo. "Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept." *Technology and Culture* 51, no. 3 (2010): 561-77, doi:10.1353/tech.2010.0009.

Matsakis, Louise. "Facebook Says It's Not a Media Company, But It Just Bought a Tool for Publishers." *Mashable*, November 11, 2016, http://mashable.com/2016/11/11/facebook-is-a-media-company/.

Nunez, Michael. "Facebook-Not a Media Company-Will Bankroll Original Video." *Gizmodo*, December 14, 2016, http://gizmodo.com/facebook-not-a-media-company-will-bankroll-original-vi-1790105706.

Packer, George. "Change the World." *The New Yorker*, January 08, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/27/change-the-world.

Scott, Mark, and Mike Isaac. "Facebook Restores Iconic Vietnam War Photo It Censored for Nudity." *The New York Times*, September 09, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/technology/facebook-vietnam-war-photo-nudity.html.

Segreti, Giulia. "Facebook CEO Says Group Will Not Become a Media Company." *Reuters*, August 29, 2016, http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-zuckerberg-idUKKCN1141WN.

Serban, Silviu. "On the Origin of the Gatekeeping Theory and Its Application to Journalism." *Journalism Studies* 16.2 (2015): 13.

Siapera, Eugenia. Papadopoulou Lambrini, and Archontakis Fragiskos, "Post-Crisis Journalism." *Journalism Studies* 16.3:449-65.

Solon, Olivia. "Facebook's Fake News: Mark Zuckerberg Rejects 'Crazy Idea' that It Swayed Voters." *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-us-election-mark-zuckerberg-donald-trump.

Thiel, Peter A., and Blake Masters. *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, London: Virgin Books, 2015.

Thielman, Sam. "Facebook Fires Trending Team, and Algorithm without Humans Goes Crazy." *The Guardian*, August 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/29/facebook-fires-trending-topics-team-algorithm.

Tuchman, Gaye. "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 660-79, doi:10.1086/225193.

Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 121-36, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024652.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karishma Mehrotra is a Master's student in the Centre for Global Media and Communications at SOAS studying the social and political implications of the future of media and technology. From a young age in California's Bay Area and Atlanta, Karishma was heavily engaged in journalism, with short stints at the Wall Street Journal, CNN, the Boston Globe and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She left the media field this year after she found herself pondering the deeper issues in the industry throughout her reporting experience. By delving into theories about knowledge dissemination and transnational journalism, Karishma has discovered the contemporary convergences between technology and media, bringing her back to her Silicon Valley roots. Ultimately, she hopes to bridge the gap between journalistic and academic writing to bring in-depth conceptual frameworks to general audiences.