18001   A SHIFT IN THOUGHT

As social media giants and Google face pressure to counter manipulation of their political content, the task is to temper a data-driven emphasis on customer engagement with social responsibility.

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Combating fake news may force big changes. After months of internal investigating by media organizations, congressional investigations, and Facebook itself, since the 2016 presidential election, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has said: "We will do our part to defend against nation states attempting to spread misinformation and subvert elections. We'll keep working to ensure the integrity of free and fair elections around the world, and to ensure our community is a platform for all ideas and force for good in democracy."

This is a startling turnabout. After years of defending themselves as communications networks, whose sole aim is to foster dialogue, social media companies like Facebook and Twitter are under increasing pressure to take responsibility for the content they carry.

The proliferation of fake news is forcing these companies to rethink their role in society, their reliance on cheap algorithms rather than expensive employees, and their engineer-driven, data-dependent culture in an era when they are increasingly curating and delivering news.

Experts suspect the company has only scratched the surface. And the problem stretches beyond Facebook.

In one sense, none of this is terribly new. Americans have at times been virulently divided, for example, during the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Vietnam War. And fake news has been around since before ancient Rome. Not all of the fake material has an obvious Russian connection.

What is new is the scale of Russian meddling and the dramatic shift of political dialogue to social networks, which until very recently clung to the idea that enabling unfettered communication by everyone was an unqualified good, even if it meant giving voice to conspiracy theorists, racists, anti-Semites, and Russian provocateurs.

Among the most popular fake news stories, one said Ms. Clinton sold weapons to the so-called Islamic State and another one claimed the pope endorsed Trump.

Part of the challenge lies in these digital giants' reliance on algorithms to make complex news decisions.

Already, Facebook has developed a specialized data-mining tool that it deployed during the French elections this past spring, helping the company identify and disable 30,000 fake accounts. The tool was used again in last month's German elections to help identify tens of thousands of fake profiles, which were deleted.

Zuckerberg has pledged to "make political advertising more transparent" on Facebook, including identifying who pays for each political ad (as TV and newspapers already do) and ending the practice of excluding certain groups from seeing ads.