DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 11.11.2022 | Zeynep Tüfekçi

We pay an ugly cost for ads on Twitter

Distracted by Elon Musk's Twitter takeover and behaviour, most have forgotten what issues are really at stake in the social media sphere

Since Elon Musk became the owner of Twitter last week, there's been a brouhaha over his plans for it, especially the possibility of various fees, like one for verification badges. Those are the blue check marks that let people know an account belongs to whom it says it belongs. They have mostly been granted through an opaque process to notable users — celebrities, heads of state, official agencies, journalists.

Some have ridiculed the idea of charging fees, claiming it would undermine free speech and create inequalities. They argue that pressure from advertisers — who have begun to shy away from Twitter since Musk took over — would force him to continue trying to moderate the site to dampen hate speech — something he signalled he might do differently from before.

Critics have said fees could make them leave the site and implored others to do so too. Leave if you like, but Twitter is likely to remain influential in shaping the news, as well as broader culture, even if many users leave, especially since journalists seem highly influenced by the platform.

All for attention

The idea that advertisers alone will save us from hate speech and the further degradation of digital social media is wishful thinking. A primarily advertiser-financed site is neither free nor healthy. The reliance on advertising by so much of our digital public sphere — Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Twitter — has perniciously fuelled tribalisation, hate speech and surveillance.

With advertiser-financed digital media, advertisers are the true customers, and what they are paying for is our attention, as much of it as they can get for as long as possible, and our data, so that they can target ads with more precision.

The need to keep users on the site for advertisers has led to design and algorithm choices that increase engagement, often with false, inflammatory or tribalizing content that research shows travels much more easily on social media.

This means that whatever the topic, by design and by algorithm, social media often elevates the worst, most divisive content, paired with 'aaaw' and affirming-type content that promotes in-group bonding.

Humans have strong in-group and out-group tendencies — sociology-speak for my team versus your team. At its best, civilisation has subsumed that dynamic into benevolent forms like athletic competitions and pride in national accomplishment, rather than war, ethnic hatred and xenophobia. If you want to keep a group of people engaged, fuelling that group competition is a pretty good method, and that's what one observes on social media, often not so benevolently. It's not so much an echo chamber where groups don't hear from one another as a football stadium where we bond by yelling at the fans from the other side.

This means that whatever the topic, by design and by algorithm, social media often elevates the worst, most divisive content, paired with 'aaaw' and affirming-type content that promotes in-group bonding. Those are two sides of the same coin. It's like a cafeteria that serves highly processed, fatty, sugary, salty food at every meal, exploiting human weakness to lure and ruin.

To target their ads more precisely, platforms relentlessly collect our data and build artificial intelligence-powered models that predict people's interests and vulnerabilities. This results in an enormous surveillance infrastructure that can be used to find who's more likely to be persuaded to change their nutritional supplements but also to hunt down women who may be pregnant and possibly seek abortions.

(Besides, ad-financed is not free, either. That price of a can of fizzy brown sugary drink or detergent includes the cost of its ads.)

The need for regulations

This is an infrastructure of authoritarianism, created to deliver ads more effectively. It's a terrible model for the digital public sphere.

Worse, digital ads are not profitable enough for the platforms without tremendous scale — hundreds of millions, or even billions, of users. To grow, social media sites provide services in countries where there is little

money to be found, but they have historically paid too little attention to what happens on their platforms after they have expanded there. In 2018, a UN investigator found that Facebook was used to fuel ethnic hatred in Myanmar; the company had few employees who spoke Burmese, disproportionate to its millions of Burmese-speaking users.

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It's true that advertisers would flee platforms that didn't moderate content, but what they have in mind may not necessarily be what's good for the public sphere. Sure, they are likely to flee a platform that is infused with the worst hate speech, but they may also dislike that a platform is used to organise for, say, a huge increase in corporate taxes. I'm not sure putting detergent or soft drink companies in charge of the public sphere is a great idea.

Traditional journalism has gone to great lengths to keep advertisers away from the newsroom — there are policies, ethics and procedures to ensure that advertisers can't influence how reporters do their jobs. It's debatable how well those policies have succeeded, though at least many newsrooms have tried to address the problem.

Traditional news organisations, including The New York Times, also seek digital ads and collect data from users to target those ads. But since digital ads provide a diminishing portion of their revenue, big publishers like The Times increasingly emphasise subscriptions.

I've been no fan of Musk. When I criticised his ill-advised foray into the rescue of 12 boys from a cave in Thailand, he told me on Twitter that the man who played a huge role in organising the actual rescue was a 'pedo guy.' He deleted the tweet, apologised and won a defamation suit, but the incident left some shareholders questioning his suitability to lead Tesla.

But we shouldn't defend an advertiser-financed model as a response to Mr Musk's antics, whatever they may be. Anyway, Mr Musk may be too impulsive to run the site, and maybe it will implode.

Finally, this should, hopefully, make everyone examine the downsides of having a few people have so much influence over the digital public sphere. As we see, owners can change. Playing the referees goes only so far.

'Just get off social media' sounds as much of a solution to me as telling people to stop watching news about a war on TV — the war is on, and

influencing so much regardless of personal decisions to stay free of it. What we need is a mix of regulatory oversight, different business models, industry self-regulation as well as citizen action, however appealing it may be to focus on a single person.

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