

153 views | Sep 7, 2018, 11:29am

Shooting The Messenger



Calum Chace Contributor

COGNITIVE WORLD ⓘ

[AI & Big Data](#)



Shooting the messenger DEPOSITPHOTOS ENHANCED BY COGWOLD

“It was Facebook wot dunnit.”

Select the unpleasantness of your choice, and Facebook is almost certainly being blamed for it by someone, and probably a lot of someones. Also in the dock are YouTube and Twitter, with Instagram and Snapchat lurking about, keeping their heads down and hoping that nobody notices them.

The charge sheet is long. Facebook and the other social media have shortened our attention spans, leaving us easy prey to slick salesmen with plausible one-liners. They have corralled us all into echo chambers, so that we only ever hear

voices telling us what we already think. We are now all isolated from the wider community. They sneakily deploy algorithms of such breathtaking sophistication that they can delve inside our neurons and suck out the information that constitutes their marrow, and then use that information against us like master hypnotists. OK, maybe I made that last bit up. But they definitely plug into our neocortex and inject a sort of digital heroin, forcing us, like enslaved machines, to spend hours online, clicking away to generate ad money.

It is because of all this skull-duggery (pun intended) that political discussion has become so heated, and people aren't listening to each other anymore.

Well, it has to be someone's fault, doesn't it, and the tech giants who own the social media are uniquely well-placed to attract universal opprobrium. For people on the political left, they are large companies which make a lot of money. For many on the left, capitalism is a conspiracy against the masses, profit is a Bad Thing, and a large profit is a Very Bad Thing Indeed. For people on the political right, the tech giants are run by suspiciously hippy-ish types, who give away their money and talk about Universal Basic Income. Their employees are a bunch of snowflake lefties who cannot bear to work with the military, and who excoriate anyone who doesn't share their hatred of the patriarchy, and who dares to question the wisdom of affirmative action hiring and training policies. And people from both political wings can hold hands while condemning the tech giants for not paying enough tax.

The mainstream media is also furious with the tech giants, and understandably so: Google and Facebook stole their lunch. Local newspapers grew fat on a diet of classified ads, but these were the first casualty of the web. National newspapers depended much less on classified ads and more on display ads and cover prices, but these have also dwindled, as advertisers have discovered the charms of paying only for eyeballs which have actually scanned their messages, and which can be micro-targeted to make those messages more relevant.

This is not something to make light of. If today's febrile political atmosphere tells us anything, it is that we need professional journalists who have genuinely mastered their craft, and who care about getting the story right as well as getting it first. We are far from figuring out all the business models we need in order to pay for this, and one way or another, pay we must.

I'm not here to defend the tech giants. They are very rich, they hire great lobbyists, and they can look after themselves. (By way of disclosure, I have never used Facebook, as I don't trust myself not to lose whole afternoons, chatting with friends and looking at cat videos. I think Twitter and Reddit are fabulous, and LinkedIn is handy, although inexplicably clumsy.) But mis-diagnosing major social problems simply allows those problems to fester while causing new ones, and it is mis-diagnosis on a grand scale to blame social media for today's vicious style of political debate. It implies that there was a halcyon past when the electorate took great care to inform itself of the arguments from both sides, thought deeply about the philosophical underpinnings of each position, and arrived at a sophisticated understanding of the issues of the day. In reality, before social media came along, people lived in the political echo chamber constructed by their newspaper of choice. Guardian readers didn't check out the talking points promoted by the Daily Telegraph or vice versa, and likewise the Sun and the Daily Mirror. And if you're looking for examples of the blatant exploitation of human appetites to boost sales, remember it was only in 2015 that The Sun stopped publishing photos of topless young women on page three.

The real reason for the bitterness of today's political conversation is not the arrival of social media. It is the considerable success of the liberal social agenda.

The left is always angry. That is as it should be: if the left isn't angry, then it's not doing its job. The job of the left is to make people discontented with the current state of affairs, and to agitate to improve it. The world can never be equal enough or just enough, and it is the left's job to keep pushing it in the right direction. The right, traditionally, is more relaxed. By and large it thinks that the world is in pretty good condition, that the institutions are doing a reasonable job, and that throwing all the cards in the air and risking anarchy is a terrible idea. Generally, both have a very good point. Societies should change: they should look for ways to solve problems, but they should do so in ways that will actually improve the lives of citizens, not to accommodate ideological whims. They should recognise that ordinary citizens today live better lives than the kings of a couple of centuries ago,

and that over-zealous radicalism has caused at least as much misery as any other social force. Apart from religion, of course.

But something changed at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Left-wingers complained that global economic policy has long been dominated by right-wing neoclassical orthodoxy. Be that as it may, during the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century, social policy in the developed world was driven strongly in a liberal direction. Strongly and quickly. Governments in developed countries now mostly spend between a third and two-fifths of GDP, and much of that spend is on social and welfare support. The treatment of homosexuals, women, and minority races has been greatly improved. Citizens were relieved of interference in their intimate lives by church and state, while on the other hand, health and safety officers worked to make construction sites and consumer goods less likely to kill and maim people.

As the economies of developed countries grew, their people became wealthier. This made them have fewer children, and made them less willing to do menial work for low wages. This spurred new waves of immigration, and innumerable studies have shown that economic migration is a boon for both the country receiving the immigrant and the one they came from.

All this means change, and change is uncomfortable. And when immigration is from countries with sharply different cultures, and perhaps different skin colours, it is more obvious, and more uncomfortable. If women, gays, and ethnic minorities are advancing, the previously privileged populations might not do worse in absolute terms, but their privilege is undermined, and less reassuring.

It is no coincidence that the creation of the Tea Party in the US, the moment when the right started to get cross, was in 2009, the year of Obama's inauguration. The election of a black president was perhaps the apogee of liberal values. It also coincided with the credit crunch and the start of the prolonged recession which that caused – a source of further discontent all round.

The extremists, the alt right and the Saundernistas, have a spring in their step, and the squishy middle which is more-or-less neoclassical in economics and liberal in social values, is looking weak. This is an important battle, and it will take some years for its fog to lift.

Meanwhile, what of social media? If we accept they are a messenger that shouldn't be shot, we shouldn't just sit back and relax. We can do much better than leaving the present undifferentiated mess of facts and lies, thoughtful opinion and rabid conspiracy theory to contend on equal terms for the attention of the unwary. Editorials in the mainstream media call for social media platforms to be treated like media and to be regulated as such. But media regulation, whether by government or by industry bodies, is ponderous and generally timid. Thanks to the magic of the web, we can do better.

Reddit gives an idea of how. Many of the posts of Reddit are based on links to newspapers, magazines and other outlets, to which readers add comments - sometimes dumb, often insightful, and occasionally hilarious. Reddit automatically rates each source, and readers vote each others' comments up or down. The most highly up-voted posts appear at the top of the page. Wikipedia is another site that crowd-sources opinion very effectively to fact-check and verify.

Using these ideas and new ones, and with the thousands of clever technologists and user experience designers they employ, the tech giants can semi-automate fact-checking, and over time, make social media better than any media or platform we have known so far. The process of getting there won't be fast, and it will be messy: the likes of TrustPilot and TripAdvisor are afflicted with false reviews on an almost industrial scale. But if problems like this are soluble, and they probably are, then we can have media and platforms where readers can easily assess the veracity of any piece of content, guided by judgements which even out and transcend partisan opinion.

Looking ahead, the tech giants are going to have the mother of all PR problems when AI-powered automation starts causing job churn, but for the time being, if we can refrain from shooting the messenger, maybe we can take the mess out of the message.

Calum Chace, columnist, is an author and speaker on artificial intelligence. Calum writes about how, in the course of this century, AI will change pretty much everything about being human. Calum's books - "The Economic Singularity" addresses the coming wave of cognitive auto... MORE