

# SENATOR,

A few months and two helpless Congress hearings later, Facebook emerged from the PR-storm slightly bruised but with no scars. The company's drop in share prices has produced little lasting impact. Global Facebook consumption is unchanged and most importantly, the public

at large has revealed itself to be utterly oblivious of the underlying issues with Facebook. What was an otherwise brilliant momentum for a debate on the way in which Facebook profits from manipulating our attention somehow ended up being all about Cambridge Analytica. The problem neither starts nor ends with the shady political consultancy nor with cursory privacy policy tweaks, although Zuckerberg has successfully framed it that way.

Rather, Facebook's very business model is to blame.



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Christoffer Hentzer Dausgaard  
Manipulation  
without Representation



The average Facebook user doesn't seem to grasp what lies behind 'running ads.' If they did, there wouldn't have been the same outrage over the Cambridge Analytica revelations, which essentially disclosed that the political consultancy had managed to do exactly what Facebook gains 98% of its revenue from: micro-targeting people with ads.

Facebook's business model is all about the commodification of attention. By analysing huge amounts of data, Facebook can predict users' behaviour and nudge them to pour more of their attention into the platform and its ads. Facebook then earns a profit from extracting, packaging and selling quantities of attention to whomever is willing to pay. This is a critical nuance which is often overlooked, and which led to much wasted time in the Facebook hearings. As Zuckerberg repeated four times in a single hearing, your data is strictly not the product that Facebook is selling. But he tiptoed past the real answer: your attention is.

Your data is the reason Facebook's algorithms know you better than your family members do from an analysis of 150 likes — your habits, your opinions, your psychological vulnerabilities. But Facebook monopolises this knowledge so it can sell your attention on to others. It would never willingly share this precious resource with anyone. Ironically, this is why the public and Facebook actually sided on the Cambridge Analytica issue: the public wanted privacy, Facebook wanted their precious data for themselves.

Zuckerberg is eager to portray Facebook as a free market of ideas, repeatedly asserting that the platform is 'all about' making people's voices heard and bringing people together. Its interface of likes, comments and shares backs up this claim, making up an impressive façade of hyper-direct participation. Yet, Facebook's underlying profit motive puts it at odds with democracy. Facebook doesn't care about the 'marketplace of ideas' for its users as much as it cares about the 'market-

place of attention' for its advertisers, which is the only source of its ballooning profits. Consequently, attention doesn't flow freely to the things that deserve it the most; it is nudged towards the things that Facebook earns a profit from.

The undemocratic externalities of this practice are most obvious in the case of political ads like those tailored by Cambridge Analytica. These so-called 'dark ads' are a blessing for political propaganda, enabling it to be invisible to everyone but advertisers and their vulnerable targets. Yet our best controls on political campaigning are public scrutiny and criticism, which traditional campaigns were designed to endure. With Facebook's unprecedented fragmentation and privatisation of the advertising space, campaigns have lost their only source of accountability.

While such targeted manipulation will hardly become the main driver of politics, two common features of modern democracies make it particularly potent nonetheless: first, that elections are decided on the narrowest of margins and second, that few voters cross the political divide. Even if targeted campaigning only works on a few voters, those few voters can make the whole difference. And the fact that elections are determined less by swing voters makes it easier, not harder, for targeted ads to make a difference. When it all comes down to turnout, advertising doesn't even have to change political leanings; it merely has to agitate some voters so that they decide to vote and decrease the confidence of others so that they don't. There is good reason to believe advertising is particularly fit for this purpose — and indeed, this was the explicit strategy of the targeted fake news campaigns of the 2016 U.S. election and Brexit vote by, amongst others, Cambridge Analytica. Facebook also seems to be aware of this potential, showing a particular interest in manipulating turnout which they have managed to raise by up to 3% in simple algorithmic experiments.

However, even if political ads disappeared, Facebook's more fundamental erosion of democratic debate would not. The democratic theorist E. E. Schattschneider observed that the people's attention is too scarce to directly decide on all political issues, why democracies should be judged not on how many issues are politicised but on the importance of those limited issues that are. Therefore, public debate is key in prioritizing our attention and structuring what information is deemed valuable. However, Facebook's attention-extracting algorithms undermine such efforts. In order to maximise time spent on the platform, the algorithms prioritise information that triggers outrage and confirms prejudices. When for example 62% of American adults get their news from Facebook's algorithms, this is likely to have a considerable impact on the public agenda. Indeed, numerous studies do find that fabricated and misleading stories are by far the most widely circulated on the platform. Of course, Facebook increases participation in the sense that people are able to comment, like and share information on a massive scale. But even if this amounts to genuine participation (which is disputable) democracy is not about maximising any participation; it is about maximising participation on the issues that matter. When Facebook's algorithm directs attention to issues that confirm our prejudices and arouse our emotions, it effectively crowds out attention to the deeper issues that may require more than 140 characters or an auto-playing 2-minute video. This is not to say that our formal agenda-setting institutions are flawless, but when it comes to Facebook, no institution in society controls our agenda more with less accountability. I think the recent Nine Dots Prize Winner, James Williams' call for 'no manipulation without representation' expresses the somewhat obvious bottom line. For Facebook to truly strengthen our democracy, it would have to be... well, democratic.

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