

Save the Press

What will it take to save journalism in a digital age?



WHITEPAPER

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FOREWORD

Facebook needs fixing, now

Two events related to tech giant

Facebook should force us to pause and reflect on how the rise of social media has affected us all, as societies, especially in the Arab world.

In October 2021, two days of testimony to US senators by whistleblower Frances Haugen, in addition to an outage that left Facebook and other popular platforms it owns, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, unavailable for six hours, not only showed how addicted we have become to these platforms, but also revealed two of their major flaws: They are neither reliable nor trustworthy.

They are unreliable in the sense that when they went down, millions of people were disconnected from their de facto sources of news. The outage should therefore serve as a stark reminder that we should never put all our eggs in one basket, and a cautionary tale for those technology enthusiasts who lobbied for a world in which Facebook feeds and Twitter posts replace traditional media outlets and credible news sites.

The writing has been on the wall for a long time but many chose not to acknowledge it. Until January this year, Donald Trump was arguably the most powerful man in the world but that did not stop Twitter and Facebook from denying him access to their platforms.

The point here is not whether those bans were justified after the horrific attack by some Trump supporters on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. The point is that even Trump, with all his power at the time, could not strong-arm the social media companies into allowing him to maintain his presence on their networks.

This should be a warning to those news outlets that have spent the past few years giving away their content free of charge to these platforms instead of investing time and money on their own sites: You can lose it all at any time.

The other issue is that consumers' increased reliance on social media for news comes at a price, and the cost is not only financial. The rise of fake news and partisan media outlets has led to massive distrust among the general public. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, for example, reported that 59 percent of people thought journalists purposely tried to mislead people by saying things they knew to be false, or publishing gross exaggerations.

Meanwhile, an estimated \$2.6 billion a year in advertising revenue is flowing into the

coffers of publishers of misinformation and disinformation, according to NewsGuard and Comscore.

None of this would have been possible without the increasing popularity of social platforms, in the sense that they provided every Tom, Dick and Harry with an audience and rewarded them for growing it, regardless of whether they were spreading real or fake news.

Some might think that all of this is mere coincidence — but that is where Haugen comes in. The day before her testimony on Capitol Hill, she explained during a TV interview how Facebook's news feed algorithm is optimized to deliver content that generates a reaction.

The company's own research found that it is "easier to inspire people to anger than it is to other emotions," Haugen said. "Facebook has realized that if they change the algorithm to be safer, people will spend less time on the site, they'll click on less ads, they'll make less money."

In other words, purely to maximize their profits, social media platforms might have widened the divisions in our societies, inspired hate attacks, convinced people to vote for policies or politicians that act against their best interests, and created a global trust deficit that has led to an unprecedented blurring of the line between fact and fiction.

There is no evidence that the operators of social media platforms wanted any of this to happen, and the malign intentions of users, whether individuals, governments or private entities, are equally to blame.

Is it too late to act? No, it is not. What should happen now is that tech companies, governments and respectable news organizations should combine their efforts to defend the truth. Governments should tax technology companies fairly, and some of those revenues should be invested in traditional media outlets.

Let us put to bed once and for all the argument that Facebook, Twitter and the like are not publishers; they are, just as Arab News, The Times of London or The Washington Post are, and they must be subject to the same disciplines.

If a social media post instigates hate, threatens the well-being of innocent people or infringes on their rights, the company that provided a platform for that message should not be immune from liability or absolved of its responsibilities.

Faisal J. Abbas, editor in chief, Arab News



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**FAISAL J. ABBAS****Editor-in-Chief
Arab News.**

Faisal J. Abbas is editor-in-chief of Arab News, the leading Middle East English-language daily based in Riyadh.

He relaunched Arab News (established 1975) with a more global and digital direction, and expanded its international presence through a large network of correspondents and regional bureaus across the world.

Before joining the newspaper in 2016, Abbas was editor-in-chief of the Dubai-based English-language service of Al Arabiya News Channel.

He is a renowned columnist on Arab-international affairs and appears regularly in international media to comment on regional affairs.

Abbas has previously written for The Huffington Post and worked with both Asharq Al Awsat and Al Hayat pan-Arab dailies, Future Television of Lebanon and the International Resource Journal in London.

He has been the recipient of many media awards, including the Next Century Foundation's Cutting Edge Award (2009) for efforts in bridging the communication gap between the West and the Arab world, and the British Council's UK alumni Social Impact award in Saudi Arabia (2017).

He holds a master's degree from the University of Westminster and a bachelor's degree from Lebanese American University. He is also a graduate of the Executive Education Program of the Harvard Kennedy School, where he studied global leadership and public policy.

Abbas is a member of the editorial board of Al Arabiya News Channel, an associate fellow of the Cambridge Union Society and a member of the British Society of Authors.

In 2017, he published his first Arabic book, "Arabi/Englizi," which describes London through Arab eyes.

**JULIEN HAWARI****Founder & CEO
WeMind and Special Edition**

Julien Hawari is the Founder and CEO of Wemind, a technology platform that combines loyalty, big data, and AI. He is also the Founder and CEO of Special Edition, a content creation company operating across the GCC.

Born in Beirut, Hawari spent most of his life in Paris, France. He completed his early studies in Paris and holds an Economics degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, US.

He launched the publishing and media company Mediaquest in 1997 with his brother, Alexandre Hawari. He was instrumental in launching multiple media brands in the Middle East and North Africa, including leading English-language international magazines on Arab affairs TRENDS, Marie Claire

Arabia, and Communicate in association with Advertising Age. He has played a key role in the expansion of Mediaquest and the opening of its offices in Dubai, Beirut, Riyadh, Algiers, Tunis, and Paris.

He played a crucial role in establishing iconic business events such as the annual conference on the business of luxury Arab Luxury World and the annual TOP CEO Conference & Awards, a transparent and audited ranking of the chief executives of GCC-listed companies with the aim of celebrating Arab business leadership and promoting corporate governance in cooperation with INSEAD Business School.

He also sits on the board of directors for Akama Holding, formerly Mediaquest, and MMP Worldwide.



LAURA CHAIBI

International Digital Media Specialist

Laura Chaibi has over 20 years of experience in digital media research, measurement, and marketing effectiveness. Originally from Vancouver, Canada, she has lived and worked across Britain, Europe, Australasia, and the Middle East.

More than \$200 million of global insights have been managed under her watchful eye across primary research, marketing effectiveness, measurement, commercial forecasting, syndicate data, and intelligence projects at a company and industry level.

As an early pioneer in digital media, she helped build the commercial and content measurement industry; from spearheading cross-screen media measurement to being a technical committee member

for a digital media using panel, tagged, and census data solutions worldwide.

She has worked for companies such as Yahoo, BBC, Orange, AOL, and MBC. Most recently, she worked at Nielsen as senior consultant on global media projects. She is also the International Consultant and Editor for the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising's advertising and marketing effectiveness training programs.

She was also commissioned by Econsultancy to author a best practice guide on digital transformation and the role of data.

Winning many industry awards along the way, and leading teams in over 10 countries, she meshes the best of both marketing and insights.



LINO CATTARUZZI

Managing Director

Google MENA

Lino Cattaruzzi has been Google's managing director in the MENA region since November 2016.

Previously, he was the country director for Google in Mexico, and before that in Argentina. He also worked at Google's headquarters in California, leading the global sales strategy team for online media solutions and previous to that, was in charge of the online sales organization for

Germany, Switzerland, and Austria while based out of Dublin.

Before joining Google, Cattaruzzi held several managerial positions at AOL Latin America, including as president for Latin America and its subsidiary in Argentina.

Cattaruzzi is Argentinean and lives in Dubai with his wife and three children.



JUAN SEÑOR

President

Innovation Media Consulting Group

Juan Señor is president of Innovation Media Consulting Group in London, one of the world's leading news media consultancies.

He has worked with and advised hundreds of media companies on every continent, and serves on the advisory boards of several media groups.

Senor is also a former visiting fellow at the University of Oxford in the UK.

He has been listed as one of "The World's Leading Innovators" in Journalism and Media" by Journalism UK. Senor is a highly sought after commentator on the media industry, speaking at global forums and quoted frequently in leading publications, such as The Economist and The Financial Times.

He is co-editor of two annual publications, "Innovation in News Media" and "Innovation in Media," written on behalf of WAN-IFRA and the FIPP,

respectively. He has edited 32 books.

Senor worked for seven years as a war and conflict reporter for PBS "NewsHour." He then became a presenter for EBN-Wall Street Journal TV and CNBC Europe. He also served as the London correspondent of International Herald Tribune Television, then owned by The New York Times and The Washington Post.

His work has been nominated for an Emmy award and his television program, "Media Report," was voted by viewers as Europe's best business program.

He continues to work as a live event and television host and presenter. He has hosted the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity for 14 years, the Reinvention Festival for a decade and dozens of public speaking engagements every year as a keynote speaker or moderator.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



TAREK ALIAHMAD

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Tarek Ali Ahmad covered the October 2019 protests in Lebanon and the country's 2018 parliamentary elections, as well as the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos in 2020. He holds an MA

in Human Rights Law from SOAS, University of London, and a BA in Media and Communication from the American University of Beirut.

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ZAIRA LAKHPATWALA

**Media Editor
Arab News**

Zaira Lakhpatwala covers the media, advertising and marketing industries. With over 10 years of experience in media and advertising, she has worked in both agencies and publishing houses in the Middle

East. She is passionate about advertising and technology, and their cumulative impact on culture and business.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past two years the pandemic has changed the ways in which many industries work. The print media and journalism industry is no exception. However, its fall began more than a decade ago with the start of a digital transformation.

As technology democratized content creation and accelerated the rate of consumption of information and news, anyone and everyone could — and did — jump onto the bandwagon of publishing news and information that was suddenly easily and widely shareable. The algorithms developed and employed by social media platforms only added to the viral nature of this content, especially controversial examples that are often untrue.

In her testimony to Congress, Haugen, who worked at Meta, formerly Facebook, as the lead product manager on the platform's civic misinformation team and later in counterespionage, told the subcommit-

tee that Facebook often resolved conflicts in ways that prioritized its own profits.

“It's about Facebook choosing to grow at all costs ... by buying its profits with our safety,” she said.

In June 2021, Arab News published the first part of a two-part white paper on the future of the media titled “The Myth of Digital Transformation.” It considered the ways in which digital transformation has disrupted the publisher ecosystem, and analyzed the role of the big tech companies in the rise of misinformation and the demise of journalism, and the complicated, evolving relationship between these companies, publishers and government.

This second part of the white paper delves into the way forward by looking at how the publishing industry has attempted to adapt to these new realities, and exploring potential solutions for creating a balanced ecosystem that benefits not only big tech and publishers, but also the truth.

Old man reading newspaper in Morocco.
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THE TIME FOR CHANGE IS NOW

The digital transformation, and the rise of big tech companies, has affected the journalism industry in two key ways:

I The effect on truth

Social media is now by far the largest source of news for most people, especially young Arabs. In 2021, 61 percent of Arab youths got their news from social media, compared with just 25 percent in 2015¹. This growing reliance on social media for news makes it ever more important that these platforms be the torchbearers of truth.

Fake news, hate speech and misinformation have long proliferated on social media platforms but the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a new wave of misinformation, with conspiracy theories and stories of false cures rampant on these platforms.

In the first three months of 2020, nearly 6,000 people around the world were hospitalized because of coronavirus misinformation, according to the World Health Organization (WHO)².

“We’re not just battling the virus. We’re also battling the trolls and conspiracy theorists

that push misinformation and undermine the outbreak response,” said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Meta alone removed more than 20 million pieces of content globally from Facebook and Instagram for violating its policies on COVID-19-related misinformation, along with more than 3,000 accounts, pages and groups for repeatedly violating its rules against spreading COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation³.

Another growing concern is deepfake technology, which is used to produce fabricated audio, video or images featuring scarily realistic likenesses of public figures. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg was himself portrayed in a deepfake video in 2019⁴. Political leaders such as former US presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama have also been the victims of deepfakes, which are much more difficult to identify as fake than text-based fake news and misinformation⁵.

2 The effect on publishers

In 2017, a committee of experts met privately at King Abdullah Economic City, in Jeddah, during the Top CEO conference to discuss the issue of big tech platforms and the danger they pose to local

Multicultural friends group using smartphone with coffee at university college break - People hands addicted by mobile smart phone - Technology concept with connected trendy millennials - Filter image. Shutterstock

governments and companies.

The key finding of their report, which remains true today, is that the big tech platforms in the region are operating without any form of regulation, Julien Hawari, the founder and CEO of technology platform WeMind and digital content-creation company Special Edition, told Arab News.

Moreover, these platforms have amortized their costs in a different country and are therefore able to sell advertising at the last marginal unit cost, unlike regional publishers who are unable to do so, he added.

In the Middle East and North Africa region, print-media advertising revenues have been declining since 2008. Digital media surpassed print's share of advertising revenue in 2016, and forecasts suggest print will command only 6 percent of the total media share by 2024⁶.

While print readership and revenue declines, digital content continues to grow. In fact the digital-content market is expected to grow by \$594.11 billion between 2021 and 2025⁷.

With this growth in digital content comes advertising but a significant portion of this is going to misinformation sites. A report by NewsGuard and Comscore found that an estimated \$2.6 billion in advertising revenue is directed to publishers of misinformation and disinformation each year by programmatic advertisers⁸, which use automated technology to buy advertising space.

Another report by NewsGuard found that 4,000 brands — including Pepsi, Starbucks, Comcast, Verizon, Marriott and even the Centers for Disease Control — have bought advertising space on misinformation websites⁹.

“In a world of abundance, it’s very difficult for the news business to create a digital advertising revenue model that is sustainable,” said Juan Senior, president of Innovation Media Consulting Group, “unless you are in the business of selling salacious content — gossip.”

He added that big tech promised the publishing industry increased traffic and advertising through the hype surrounding digital-only publishers such as BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, and Vice Media. But all of these companies are struggling now.

“The biggest blunder the publishing industry made, 25 years ago when the internet was brought in on us, was to give it all away for free,” Senior said.

However, the internet is no longer new to publishers; a quarter of a century has passed and they know how to profit from it using digital channels.

In fact, Haugen cited BuzzFeed as an example during her testimony. She stated that the company once told Facebook that the content that was proving to be the most successful on the latter’s platform was the content BuzzFeed was most ashamed of.

“You have a problem with your ranking;” BuzzFeed told Facebook, and yet Facebook did nothing about it, she added.

Speaking at the Web Summit in Lisbon in November 2021, John Witherow, editor-in-chief of The Times, said: “Most media companies prostrated themselves in the face



An estimated \$2.6 billion in advertising revenue is directed to publishers of misinformation and disinformation each year by programmatic advertisers.

FUNDING MISINFORMATION

4,000+

brands have bought ads on misinformation websites publishing COVID-19 myths since the beginning of the pandemic.

80%+

of sites were repeat offenders.

67%

of all of the COVID-19 misinformation websites identified with ad placements had Google advertising tags on them.

\$2.6bn

in estimated ad revenue is being sent to publishers of misinformation & disinformation each year.

\$1

goes to misinformation websites from US advertisers for every \$2.16 in digital ad revenue sent to legitimate newspapers.

Source: NewsGuard "Special Report: Top brands are sending \$2.6 billion to misinformation websites each year" (2021) and "Special Report: Advertising on COVID-19 Misinformation" (2021)

of the tech companies — they bankrolled the success of these platforms by giving out content for free.”

He added: “Tech platforms owned the revenues, we owned all the costs.”

Now, however, said Senor, “we (the publishers) know how to make money, and yet our fortunes were entirely tied to giving it all out for free on these platforms.”

THE RESURGENCE OF GENUINE NEWS

More than 50 percent of people are concerned about what is true or false on the internet when it comes to news, according to a report by the Reuters Institute¹⁰. The rise of misinformation is leading more people to pay for digital news, with 21 percent in the US, 45 percent in Norway and 8 percent in the UK paying for online news¹¹.

During the US presidential election in 2016, “the world, and particularly, Western democracies, realized that you can lie your way to victory, you can manipulate the truth, and that social media is the perfect platform for you to do so,” said Senor.

With this realization came the “Trump bump.” As people began to search for the truth in a sea of fake news, digital news subscriptions shot up. This was coupled with governments coming to the realization that big tech is undermining the “truth and freedom of expression,” leading to “radicalization, violence and even death,” Senor added.

“Quality journalism is in rude health,” said Witherow.

The lack of trust in news on social media is apparent even in the Middle East. The percentage of Arab youths who get their news from social media dropped from 79 percent last year to 61 percent this year¹².

At the same time, trust in social media is also shaky, with just 26 percent of Arab youths saying they find social media to be a trustworthy source of news¹³.

“The world realized that a pandemic without journalism is unthinkable and that we should pay for journalism in such dire times,” said Senor.

Recognizing an interest among readers in paying for trustworthy news, and to protect their revenue margins, publishers have had to put a price on truth, even while fake news remains free. This has resulted in

three main types of paywalls:

Freemium: This model offers a combination of free and premium content.

Examples: The Guardian, Gulf News.

Metered paywall: This option offers a limited quantity of free content, after which users are required to subscribe and pay.

Examples: The New York Times, Washington Post, WIRED.

Hard paywall: This requires users to sign up and pay for any and all content.

Examples: The Information, Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal.

TYPES OF PAYWALLS

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● **Hard paywall:** This model requires users to pay and sign-up for any and all content.

Examples: *The Information, Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal*

The hard paywall is the rarest of the models. The freemium and metered paywall models are more common as they allow publishers to benefit from web traffic generated by low-to-medium-interest readers. Some sites, like The New Yorker, use a dynamic paywall that decides the number of free articles on offer based on a user’s reading habits.

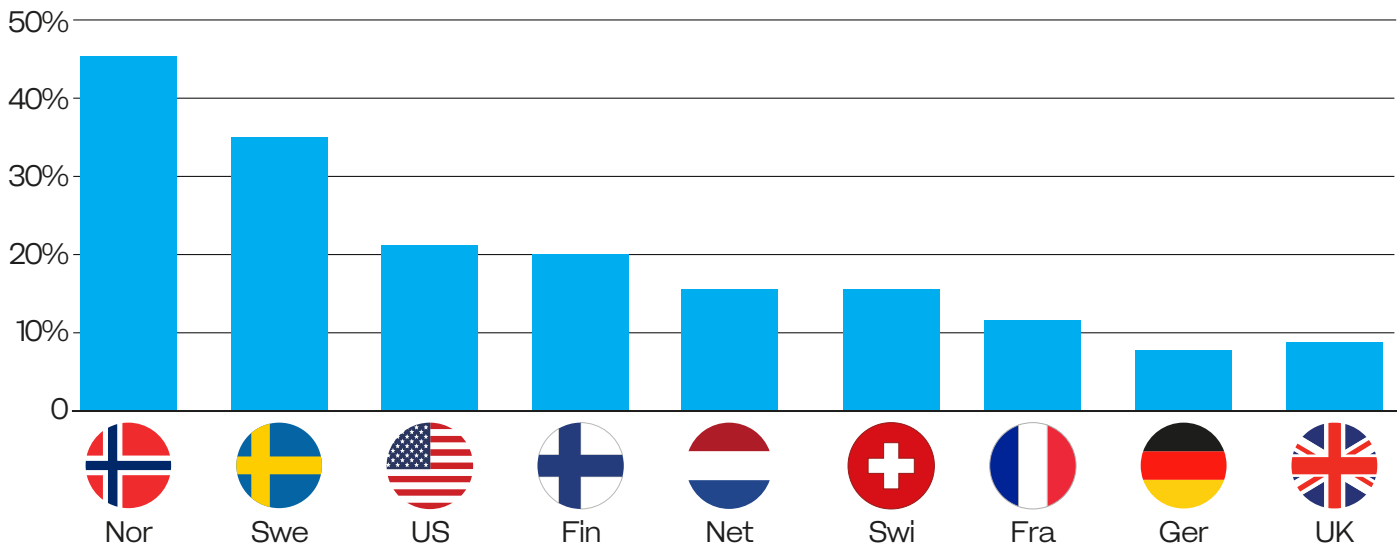
Variations of all of these models exist. Even though The Economist and The Times both use a metered paywall, for example, The Economist requires readers to sign-up for free, using their email address, to access a limited number of articles.

The Times was among the first newspapers, a decade ago, to implement a paywall. “And the gamble has paid off,” Witherow said.

“The Sunday Times and The Times now have 375,000 digital-only subscribers, and they’re loyal; they read for 20 minutes, on average, with every visit to the site.”

In the Middle East, the UAE-based, English-language daily Gulf News is the only publisher to use a paywall for digital content. It offers two options: A standard package

DIGITAL NEWS SUBSCRIBERS



Source: Reuters Institute "Digital News Report 2021"

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provides access to most website content, while a prime package additionally allows access to new sections of the newspaper launched this year, including Living in UAE, Your Money, Parenting and The Good.

Abdul Hamid Ahmad, the CEO, editor-in-chief and executive director of publications for Gulf News, told Arab News: "People think that when you go behind the wall, you're preventing readers from reading. No, in fact you're opening a gateway for them for trusted journalism."

NEW WORLD, NEW RULES

As publishers adjust their strategies to remain in business, it is imperative for industry bodies and governments to step in to regulate the industry from the inside and the outside.

SELF-REGULATION

Currently, online platforms are self-regulating, or at least trying to, especially with regards to tackling misinformation and other harmful content.

In 2020, for example, Google took action against nearly 168 million pages under its policy on dangerous and derogatory content, and more than 1.8 million channels were removed from Google-owned YouTube between January and March this year for spreading misleading or spam content.

"Regionally, we recently launched the Google Safety Engineering Center for Content Responsibility, in Dublin, a hub

to tackle the spread of illegal and harmful content and a place where we can share this work, and improve it, with policymakers, researchers and regulators," said Lino Cattaruzzi, the managing director of Google MENA.

"Our approach to tackling disinformation in our products and services is based around a framework of three strategies: Make quality count in our ranking systems, counteract malicious actors, and give users more context."

More than 500 hours of content are uploaded to YouTube every minute. In addition to machine-learning technology, the platform has thousands of reviewers working 24/7.

"Human reviewers are essential to evaluating context and to ensuring that educational, documentary, scientific and artistic content is protected," said Cattaruzzi.

Between January and March 2021, the platform removed more than 85,000 videos and 43 million comments that encouraged messages of hate.

YouTube and Google, like other tech platforms, tailor content based on the viewing and reading habits of users. Although this personalization is advantageous for advertisers, it can be dangerous for individual users and the wider society. By only showing people content that is similar to what they have previously engaged with, or recommending content based on that, the platforms often reinforce existing ideologies and views rather than

offering the neutral or balanced content that is a critical element in helping users to form a well-rounded, informed perspective.

“We’re always thinking about expanding the perspectives and offering new points of view that will be interesting and useful for our users, and that’s something we’re looking more into,” said Cattaruzzi.

He added that the company recognizes that while recommendations work fine for things such as beauty tutorials and cat videos, they do not work as well for news and other complex topics.

“To that end, we’re working to make sure more authoritative content is presented all over the site on news topics, including on recommendations,” he added.

Meta’s platforms, meanwhile, influence the world views not only of individual users but also their families and friends.

“Facebook shapes our perception of the world by choosing the information we see,” Haugen told the US Senate.

“Even those who don’t use Facebook are impacted by the majority who do. A company with such frightening influence over so many people, over their deepest thoughts,

feelings and behavior, needs real oversight.”

Despite Meta’s investment of \$13 billion in safety and security¹⁴, in the run-up the 2020 US presidential election troll farms reached 140 million Americans a month¹⁵. Troll farms in Eastern Europe were responsible for most popular pages on the platform for Christian and Black American content, and they achieved this as a result of Facebook’s algorithms, not user choice¹⁶. In 2018, Facebook began to prioritize “meaningful social interactions,” which means more content that is shared by family and friends and less from brands and publishers, said Haugen. However, this also resulted in more content that was likely to elicit a strong reaction, she added, even if — perhaps especially if — it is controversial or hateful.

The New York Times published a report in September 2021 outlining how an internal Meta project, code-named “Project Amplify,” attempted to shape the company’s public image by pushing pro-Meta articles — some of them written by the company — on the Facebook news feeds of its users¹⁷.

During the same month The Wall Street



Facebook should not get a free pass on choices it makes to prioritize growth, virality and reactivity over public safety.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM FRANCES HAUGEN’S SENATE TESTIMONY & THE FACEBOOK FILES

Frances Haugen is the Facebook whistleblower who leaked internal research documents to the Wall Street Journal resulting in the publishing of “The Facebook Files.”



32%

of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse.

5%

of teen girls say Instagram makes thoughts of suicide worse.

1 in 3

teen girls found that Instagram made body image issues worse.

40%+

of teen users in the US and UK who reported feeling “unattractive” said the feelings started when using Instagram.

13%

of British users and 6% of American users, among teens who reported suicidal thoughts, traced the desire to kill themselves to Instagram.

87%

of misinformation spending is dedicated to English speakers even though only 9% of Facebook users are English speakers.

ARAB NEWS

RESEARCH & STUDIES
THE MIDDLE EAST, BETTER EXPLAINED

Journal began publishing a series of stories, called The Facebook Files, it said were based on “a review of internal Facebook documents including research reports, online employee discussions and drafts of presentations to senior management¹⁸.”

The stories cover a range of problematic topics such as: The existence of “XCheck,” a program that shields high-profile accounts from the company’s rules; research showing the negative effects of Instagram on teenage girls, which Meta had hidden from lawmakers and downplayed in public; a change in Facebook’s algorithm in 2018 that can result in the promotion of objectionable or harmful content; and how Meta ignored warnings from employees about the use of the platform for human-trafficking purposes.

Facebook implemented safeguards to reduce misinformation ahead of the 2020 US presidential election but turned them off after the election, Haugen said, until the attack on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

“Facebook changed those safety defaults in the run-up to the election because they knew they were dangerous,” she said. But because they wanted the growth in engagement back they returned to the default settings, which is “deeply problematic,” she added.

GOVERNMENT REGULATION

Big tech platforms have demonstrated they do not have the capacity or inclination to effectively regulate themselves.

The Facebook Files led to pressure from lawmakers and industry bodies. This resulted in Facebook pausing its work on Instagram Kids, and a hearing of the Senate Commerce Committee during which company executives were questioned about their research.

“It (regulation) is really a balancing act because these are borderless businesses,” said international digital media specialist Laura Chaibi, who has worked for organizations such as Yahoo, BBC, and MBC.

“Where they are headquartered is often where they are regulated from but if they’re based in other countries, then they have a regulatory responsibility to work with the governments in those countries if they want to be in those markets.”

Often, big tech companies hide from the

laws that govern traditional publishers under the pretext of being a platform and not a publisher. As Haugen said, user-generated content is something companies have less control over “but they have 100 percent control over their algorithms.”

She added: “Facebook should not get a free pass on choices it makes to prioritize growth, virality and reactivity over public safety.”

Technologies have been developed by several independent organizations to control, or at least counter, some of the problematic aspects of big tech organizations — mainly fake news, misinformation and bots.

PolitiFact, by the Poynter Institute, is a fact-checking website that uses its “Truth-O-Meter” to rate the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others. It also works with Meta and TikTok to slow the spread of misinformation.

The platform flag posts identified as potentially being factually inaccurate or misleading. PolitiFact’s team then reviews the posts and provides feedback to the social media companies. Meanwhile Meta and TikTok decide what, if any, action needs to be taken about the posts under review.

Other services such as Botometer and Botslayer aim to identify the use of bots on social media platforms, while Captain Fact and ClaimBuster work to verify the authenticity of online content.

Steven Smith and his team at the Artificial Intelligence Software Architectures and Algorithms Group, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Lincoln Laboratory, developed the Reconnaissance of Influence Operations program, which automatically detects disinformation narratives and the individuals spreading those narratives on social media networks.

The team’s vision is for the program to be used by industry organizations and the government, which hints at potential models for solutions governments could use to regulate big tech.

The ambition, and need, among authorities to rein in big tech is unanimous but “we are in a situation where these companies are bigger and more powerful than single-level-country governments, and that balance of power is being distorted,” said Chaibi.

Although the US has in place antitrust

laws, designed to protect consumers from predatory business practices, and has tried to use them against the big tech companies, not all countries have equivalent laws. This has resulted in the monopolization of the market, which is unfair to local players.

“The role of government in this situation is to ensure that there are fair practices among older players (and the new, in other words the big tech companies), and that no one player is allowed the concentration of power to influence and distort the market,” said Hawari.

THE WAY FORWARD

In a bid to save not only journalism but also the very concept of the truth and the fabric of our societies, it is imperative that publishers, governments and the big tech companies work together.

Eventually, “Google and Facebook are going to sue for peace,” Senor predicted.

In June 2021, Australian broadcaster and publisher Nine Entertainment Co. Holdings signed multi-year, content-supply deals with Google and Facebook. It followed similar agreements between the platforms and Seven West Media and Rupert Murdoch’s New Corp; as a result, the three largest media firms in the country now have deals with the tech giants¹⁹.

Nine Entertainment, the owner of the Australian Financial Review and Sydney Morning Herald newspapers and the free-to-air Nine Network, said it will provide articles and clips to Google’s News Showcase platform for five years, and to a similar Facebook product for three years²⁰. The move came after months of negotiation, during which Facebook briefly banned third-party content from Australian companies.

In a 2020 blog post, Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced an “initial \$1 billion investment in partnerships with news publishers and the future of news²¹.” He added that for several years the company has “taken many steps to support the news industry,” such as “sending 24 billion visits to news websites globally every month” and a \$300 million commitment from Google News Initiative.

Meta, which launched its Journalism Project in 2017, said that since 2016 it has spent \$84 million on programs supporting its fact-checking efforts²².

In a blog post in February 2021, Nick Clegg, Meta’s vice president of global affairs, wrote: “Facebook is more than willing to partner with news publishers²³.” He added that the company has invested \$600 million since 2018 to support the news industry and plans to invest a further \$1 billion over the next three years.

In 2020 it launched Facebook News in the US, followed by a UK launch a year later. The portal is a dedicated space for national and local news, wherein Facebook will pay publishers for content that is not already on the platform. In the UK, partner publishers include Conde Nast, The Economist, Guardian Media Group and Hearst, among others.

In March 2021, Meta announced that it would launch a new platform in the US to help independent writers, including the payment of \$5 million to local journalists in multiyear deals²⁴.

However, Senor said it is not sufficient for big tech platforms simply to “throw money” like this at publishers and the industry when they are profiting to the tune of billions of dollars.

“It is pure tokenism,” he said. “It’s literally loose change, crumbs that fall off the table, for them.”

In addition, the tech platforms target flagship brands in various countries for partnership deals and “offer them a very sweet deal, which they do not extend to the smaller-to-medium-range newspapers,” he added.

This makes the notion of a “digital tax” crucial for these companies, as private deals alone are not enough. A report by the Spanish consulting firm Qbo Investigación y Estrategia analyzed how much social media companies should pay publishing companies for using their content. The quantification is based on the ‘but-for’ test, which asks if a certain variation or harm would have occurred but for a particular action. If not, then that action is responsible for the harm.

Based on this analysis, the firm calculated that every year companies like Google and Meta should pay 7.1 percent of their advertising revenue i.e. €514 million in Canada, 11 percent, which is €11 billion in Germany, 8.8 percent, which is €263 million in Spain, and 8.4 percent, which is €600 million in Australia.



CONCLUSION

The discussions and laws around regulation and keeping big tech in check are not designed to curb the digital revolution. They are only intended to balance the ecosystem and create a level playing field for all players.

“Today, everyone is welcome in the market and there is no reason to have certain parties excluded,” said Hawari. In fact, a key pillar of a well-functioning market is to encourage all participants, he added.

He suggests taking a lesson from history. In the 1980s, for example, when American TV studios were becoming more powerful they sold programming to French TV channels at much lower rates than French studios could offer.

“For (American studios), it was almost pure profit because all they had to do was copy the program on videotape and ship it to the TV station,” said Hawari.

At the time, the French government concluded that TV and cinema are essential parts of French culture and imposed on

broadcasters a mandatory quota for local content. By limiting global competition in the short-term, France helped its own industry to grow, creating in the long run a thriving film and entertainment industry comprised of both local and international players.

“It is important that governments have a point of view about the relationship between these tech platforms, what they need to achieve in terms of public good, and finding some amicable balance on how they’re going to regulate them,” said Chaibi.

For example, the BBC in the UK is funded by taxpayers’ money, through annual TV licenses that viewers are required to buy, and so the corporation has a responsibility to use this money in ways that serve the public good.

Like Hawari, Chaibi emphasized the obligation of all governments to serve the public good and maintain the cultural fabric of society. Even now, in our increasingly globalized world, media organizations in

Remote control in a television studio.
Shutterstock



Canada a community radio station on the air live.

some countries are still required to adhere to laws pertaining to the origin and nature of content.

In Canada, for example, English- and French-language radio stations must ensure that at least 35 percent of the popular music they broadcast each week is of Canadian origin. Commercial stations must ensure that 35 percent of popular music broadcast between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, is Canadian.

Haugen also advocated a multipronged approach, including steps such as a move away from an engagement-based news feed, the sharing of information with oversight bodies such as the US Congress, and the implementation of “soft interventions” similar to those introduced during the 2020 US presidential election.

“We don’t want to limit the power of the digital revolution, because digital is the greatest thing that has ever happened to journalism,” said Senor. Digital media provides journalists with a wide reach

through which they can inform the public, he added, and this, rather than making money, is what is most important to journalists.

“The digital shift is actually making us better journalists,” said Witherow. “For the future, our goal is simple: We make fewer but better stories. We’ll be defined as much by what we don’t cover as what we do.”

Digital revenue at The Times grew by 30 percent in 2020, and at three-quarters of a million its total circulation is the highest it has been this century, he said.

“And we’ve challenged the (UK) government and had a significant win by removing VAT from digital products, like our news,” he added. “This has brought millions more into our pockets.”

Ultimately, said Senor, whether content is delivered through a digital platform, in print or on television, “we want to inform the public. We want to hold power to account. We want to give a voice to the voiceless. We are the ‘fourth estate’ and, our power is derived from an audience.”

FOOTNOTES

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4. CNN “A deepfake video of Mark Zuckerberg presents a new challenge for Facebook” (2019)
5. The Guardian “You thought fake news was bad? Deep fakes are where truth goes to die” (2018)
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23. Facebook “The Real Story of What Happened With News on Facebook in Australia” (2021)
24. Reuters “Facebook to pay \$5m to local journalists in newsletter push” (2021)