

Striking the balance: why we still need a plurality dialogue



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Digital Intermediaries play an increasingly influential role in our news consumption

A couple of years ago, I **wrote** about public interest concerns raised by the increasing influence over our media consumption exercised by digital intermediaries like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Apple. I called for a *plurality dialogue* between experts, civil society and these companies, to debate these issues.

Developments since then have made this dialogue more urgent than ever. Digital intermediaries are increasing their importance as gateways to news. According to **Reuters Institute data**:


- Over 40% of online news in Germany and France is accessed via search, while 28% of online news in the USA arrives via social media.
- Younger people are heavier users of digital intermediaries – in the US, 45% of 18-24 year olds rely on search and 41% on social media to access their news.
- Even in the UK, where news brands (such as the BBC's) remain very important, search and social media are significant sources for 18-24 year olds looking for both breaking stories and analysis.

The digital intermediary sector is characterised by a high degree of concentration. Google accounts for the lion's share of search visits – around 90% in the UK – while Facebook and YouTube account for around **75% of social media usage**.

Recent events have confirmed how decisions taken by digital intermediaries can and do influence the nature and range of content we are able to access online. The concerns raised are not just about access to headline news stories. Digital intermediaries help users find out information about many of the key political, social and economic issues of the day in ways likely to complement their access to conventional news.

What are the plurality concerns ?

As part of their everyday business, digital intermediaries decide which content to deliver to end users, and how much profile to give that content in search results, newsfeeds, or on the shelves of an app store. Search engines, for example, operate via complex algorithms which are designed to deliver results which are useful to users. Just as newspapers and TV news programmes might be able to influence the news agenda by their choice of stories and opinion pieces, so digital intermediaries are in a position to influence which stories and suppliers their users are able to access easily every day.

For many users, these functionalities provide massive consumer benefits. Relevant search results tailored to individuals are great if you are looking for the best value TV or holiday flight. They are less helpful for those who might benefit from a challenging range of perspectives on the key issues of the day. Algorithms designed to maximise personal "relevance" could mean individuals get access only to news which fit their view of the world, which support their perspective  and

prejudices. As a society, though, we might prefer our citizens to have regular exposure to a diversity of stories and more challenging perspectives.

The absence of a regulatory infrastructure

More widely, digital intermediaries either voluntarily or by enforced action can block or downgrade access to content. Google already modifies search results in some countries to comply with less liberally-minded governments. It has also been obliged in response to the European Court of Justice's ruling on the "right to be forgotten" to block some search results. Facebook's newsfeed algorithms determine which stories are given most attention – which can, even if unintentionally, influence public awareness of important and difficult subjects. Facebook has also in the past mounted its own campaigns to promote issues of interest to its founder – for example a campaign to promote organ donations. Although in that case of potentially great benefit to society, it also suggests the dangers if such powers are misused.

Earlier this year, Twitter announced it was suspending accounts related to the graphic imagery surrounding the execution of the journalist James Foley. This was seen as a significant moment by media commentators, as it was an acknowledgment that social media companies are platforms which can and do exercise editorial judgement. As Emily Bell at Columbia recently observed, powerful intermediaries like Google and Facebook are increasingly making decisions about what we should or shouldn't see. Traditional news media have done this for decades, of course, but for all their faults, they have developed industry practices, cultures and codes of conduct which provide some underpinning of the choices they make, and scope for seeking redress if those codes are ignored. The new intermediaries do not have this culture or self-regulatory infrastructure to draw upon, but they are increasingly our preferred route for accessing news.

Dialogue rather than Government regulation

It was to reflect these concerns that I called for a "plurality dialogue" between government, digital intermediaries and other stakeholders. Rather than forcing government to develop a new regulatory toolkit, intermediaries could acknowledge their responsibilities and work out how to address these concerns. The dialogue might have resulted in best practices for dealing with protecting and promoting access to a diversity of news. It could have covered the provision of greater transparency and accountability in the quasi-editorial decision-making processes used by intermediaries. It might have covered citizens' expectations of best practices, including mechanisms for those with legitimate concerns about decisions taken by intermediaries to seek redress.

So far, there has been a disappointing lack of progress on these matters in the UK, although the DCMS has recently accepted that digital enterprises should be included in any assessment of media plurality. This should provide a new opportunity for debating these issues. There has, however, been an increasing interest in these issues in the rest of Europe, especially in France and Germany. Some of the concerns are partly driven by the commercial interests of rival media organisations however some are legitimate public interest concerns which include a perceived threat to national sovereignty and the financial risks posed to high quality journalism.

We now have an opportunity to build on this, to engage all parties in a wider debate. That debate needs to reflect carefully on the issues, and to distinguish between public and commercial interests. There is a balance to be struck between protecting important consumer benefits clearly delivered by intermediaries, and addressing legitimate concerns of those who worry about their impact (albeit often inadvertent) on media plurality and diversity. A thoughtful and open dialogue is still the best way of striking this balance, and avoiding heavy-handed regulation.

This post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.



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