

2018 is a crucial year for the platform-publisher relationship



Is 2018 the year when the publisher/platform relationship is turned on its head? Is this the moment when policy-makers change the balance of power between the tech giants and the content creators?

Recent years have been tough on publishers as the social networks and search companies have grown up from transformative teens to dominating adults. Once mighty media brands have seen the Silicon Valley behemoths disrupt and dominate their revenue, audiences and even their content creation and distribution systems.

Companies like Facebook, Google, Twitter and Amazon have vacuumed up vast amounts of advertising. They have captured the public attention online. They recruit the best of the young talent. They either buy out or fund the most innovative research and development around new technologies such as AI and VR. For many people, markets and even countries they are now the information infrastructure.

Burgeoning networks

They have done all this while happily using publishers' product to feed their burgeoning networks with (usually) free content. In return the publishers get thin slices of revenue, occasional hand-outs, some very neat tools and access to a global public. Publishers hope that the people they reach on those platforms will return to places where the content creators can get them to pay up and build a more loyal, sustainable relationship.

It is a fragile 'friendship'. As Facebook's Newsfeed change this year showed, what platforms give, platforms can take away. An algorithm change cooked up in Menlo Park can wreck business plans for publishers around the world. Recent Oxford University research shows that publishers are well aware that in the short-term they need to work with the platforms. There is a powerful 'fear of missing out'. But in the longer-term they are worried that the relationship is creating a dependency culture.

But it seems to some that the tables have turned. Take Facebook. That Newsfeed algorithm change was a profound strategic move aimed at securing Facebook's long-term business model of keeping people active on its platform for the maximum time. Yet it was trialed in the most careless way, nearly destroying some vital independent news media organisations in countries that can ill afford to lose good journalism. And across the world, some publishers that depended on Facebook for scale found their traffic shredded almost overnight leaving them scrambling for a new business model. Add in the Cambridge Analytica story. Add in accusations that it was failing to stem the tidal wave of 'fake news' and deliberate disinformation from malevolent sources such as Russia.

Bad public relations

This was all bad public relations but it is having real policy impacts. In Europe especially, both individual governments in France and Germany and the EU as a whole are planning and implementing interventions that will make these platforms responsible for harmful content. The Germans have brought in the NetzDG law that could lead to fines of up to 50 million Euros. The EC is toying with the idea of a levy on the platforms. Anti-trust actions are being considered on both sides of the Atlantic.

But it would be a mistake if publishers thought that these attempts to rein in the power of the platforms automatically solves their problems. Firstly, they might not happen. There is a lot of rhetoric from politicians but when it comes down to practical interventions they realise that regulation is complex and potentially counter-productive. The platforms have responded by bringing in new measures to tackle the worst problems. Facebook has hired hundreds of moderators in Germany alone. Tens of thousands of accounts and pages have been closed. Twitter is hiring new 'independent' advisors. Google and Facebook are both introducing measures to 'up-rank' more trusted content. They have both brought in fact-checking agencies and collaborated with mainstream newsrooms to help filter our misinformation, especially around elections. These are all useful measures but they still feel like reactive attempts to head off more serious regulatory actions. That might not be a bad thing. Do publishers really want the platforms to be treated in the same way as newsrooms?

Publishers must act

The first step for publishers has to be to get their own houses in order. Yes, there has been a Trump/Brexit/fake news 'bump' for the better brands. At a time of distrust of information in general, we can see that there is a flight to quality. That has been especially good for those brands who have already been building alternative models for recruiting and engaging customers. Also good for publishers who produce credible, engaging, quality content. Less good for those who went down the click bait route. Remember, the public may be falling out of love with the platforms, but the trust ratings for mainstream media are not much to write home about. There is no point screaming about Facebook's failings if you hide your corrections column at the bottom of page 42.

All the statistics show that, even in the wake of recent scandals, the number of people going to the platforms to discover and share content is growing. For example, I find it hard to think of a solution to the local/hyper local news problem that does not involve Facebook in some way. Even an analogue publisher will still benefit from social networks if people are talking about their product on them. Collaboration is still possible, though very much like hedgehogs and sex, it has to be done carefully.

Clumsy policy-makers, egged on by angry publishers happily highlighting the worst excesses of the platforms, might make mistakes. Yes, we need more responsible, accountable, transparent platforms. But we don't want to restrict the networks that have provided such a valuable space for public expression and reach for publishers. The platforms have acted in bad faith and incompetently on a number of issues such as data privacy and allowing disruptive propaganda. But that is not the same as 'blaming' them for Donald Trump or Brexit.

Truth, trust and technology

We are only half-way through our *LSE Truth, Trust and Technology Commission* investigating the information crisis, but it is already clear that we need new ways of thinking about how to shape our media environment. We have brought together publishers, policy makers, the platforms and 'the public' to think this through. There is never going to be consensus.

The different stakeholders have to be honest about their self-interest and some are much more powerful than others. The relationship between publishers and platforms is 'toxic'. Despite their efforts to hire people who can mediate more sympathetically between themselves and the media brands, it is clear that the platforms still struggle to understand their needs. Likewise, there is still a failure on behalf of the publishers to appreciate that their analogue party is over and a new world has been created. But we can all shape that future.

In the UK we have a very mixed regulatory environment. Broadcasters, newspapers, telecoms, advertisers and social media all have different systems. With the platforms we have not even agreed what they are. The truth is that they are all different and while they share characteristics such as curation or editing and are subject to national laws, they are not easily put into a category such as 'publisher', channel or 'pipes'. The debate about whether Google or Facebook are 'media' companies (whatever that means) misses the point. Do we want to treat them like data companies and fine them for breaches? Or are they like a public utility that should adhere to minimum 'health and safety' standards? As they influence politics should they fall under the Electoral Commission? Or should they have Independent Ombudsmen? Or perhaps all of the above and more? Be careful what you wish for. Around the world less democratic governments are already racing to bring in measures to control these platforms. For citizens and publishers they are often the only route around authoritarianism.

Publishers have history

Publishers have a strong sense of their institutional role. They have a history that platforms could learn from. They are not going to become history anytime soon. Content and curation are still king. People are willing to pay for their judgement. Over time publishers have both resisted and accepted their role in society beyond market imperatives. In the UK we had an extended and profound debate, for example, about our newspapers through the Leveson inquiry. The BBC went through a painful Charter renewal process. Opinion is divided as to the value of the results of those arguments, but at least they took place in public. They are held accountable to some degree to uphold public interest.

This is now happening to the platforms. As their performances in front of various parliamentary committees have shown, they are, to put it mildly, uncomfortable with that process. They have a right to defend their position and their profits. However, these youthful but giant companies need to learn social graces, some humility and to open themselves up to scrutiny.

2018 is the year when we all woke up to the fact that technology is not neutral. The same platforms and tools that can bring people together and connect us to an unimaginable diversity of entertaining, informative and inspirational content and conversation can also bring lies, anger, and malevolent communication. The Silicon Valley ideology that created these dazzling digital entities is no safeguard against pernicious forces rampaging through the systems they built.

It is time to think about what actions are needed. Yet, above all, this a fast-moving, developing situation. New technologies such as voice interactivity, image manipulation, artificial intelligence and blockchain are creating new spaces and dynamics. We need to know much more about what is really happening out there before we rush to judgement and legislation. There are no simple solutions. In fact, talking about 'solutions' may itself underestimate the scale of the task. Publishers have nearly as much at stake here as the platforms themselves. When we start to come up with answers, let us make sure we have asked the right questions. 2018 is, indeed, a crucial year, but it is only the start of the process.



Notes:

- *This is the longer version of an article that first appeared in [InPublishing Magazine](#). It was published by [LSE Media Policy Project](#).*
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Charlie Beckett is director of the [LSE Truth, Trust and Technology Commission](#) (T3), that reports on the information crisis this autumn. He is a professor in the LSE department of media and communications and director of LSE's journalism think-tank [Polis](#). He is on Twitter as [@CharlieBeckett](#)

