



## EconoMag

### The Balkanization of the Internet

by Alex Hurst

Hello and welcome to Economag. Today we're going to be talking about the Balkanization of Internet media and what Facebook can do to stop the problem. For months, teenagers in Macedonia have been living lives plucked out of Internet spam comments. The type of comments that tell you that you can make thousands of dollars every month, all from the comfort of your own home.

As BuzzFeed reported just weeks before the election, the gravy train they rode was Donald Trump - or rather, his followers, whose enthusiastic clicks and angry re-posts supported an ecosystem of hundreds of sites that posted completely fake, pro-Trump news. Like an endorsement by Pope Francis that never happened, or that Hillary Clinton had Parkinson's Disease which she didn't. Some of the fake stories got multiple times more shares than *The New York Times* most shared ones.

And the rails beneath the gravy train? Facebook, the *sine qua non* of the fact-free Internet, because Facebook has allowed for the Balkanization of Internet media.

Winston Churchill once quipped that the best argument against democracy was a five-minute conversation with the average voter. Today, even he would go pale at how little most voters really know, and how much of what they think they know is wrong.

Facebook has a civic duty to put this right. It knows this, or at least, some of its employees do — early on in the primary campaigns, Facebook employees frantically discussed whether they should use the social network's pervasive power to impede the rise of Trump. The answer, of course, isn't that Silicon Valley should put its finger on the scale directly in favor of one candidate or another. But Facebook *must* throw its weight behind objective reality and fact-based journalism.

So here's how it can, in three simple steps:

Step One: Create a trustworthiness ranking for websites based on the quality and reputability of the content they publish.

Google does this, in a way, in how it chooses to display search results, it keeps its algorithm secret, but, in order to supplement the automated work Facebook also needs to hire teams of trained journalists as editors — hundreds if necessary — to maintain

human oversight, and also to ensure that high-information but low-traffic sites (like university-based blogs and think tank research) get incorporated into the trustworthiness algorithm.

#### Step Two: Expose low-information users to higher quality content

Facebook already detects political leanings based on what articles users share, comment on, and click. Depending on the ranked quality of the links an individual user posts and clicks on, Facebook could increase the frequency with which high-quality links with opposing viewpoints appear in the user's feed. I.e., low information users who habitually post and click on content from disreputable sites would see their feed populated with fewer similar links, and more high-ranking content on the same issue, both in-line with and opposed to their own political views.

#### Step Three: Penalize disreputable sources.

Facebook could start to push back against the spread of bad information, wherever it appears. Links to sites with a low trustworthiness rankings would be impeded from spreading far across Facebook by being less likely to appear in other users' newsfeeds after a friend has posted a link to it. This would slow the spread of fact-free and fake news, and impede the proliferation of Macedonia-like scenarios.

Medicine, law, journalism... plenty of professions have a code of ethics that they agree to abide by. Why not tech as well? Nearly half of Americans get their news solely from Facebook. That puts the social network in a position of enormous power, and therefore enormous responsibility.

It's long past due for Facebook to accept that.

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