From: (JUST)

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Subject: FLASH: meeting CAB Jourova and FB on changes being made to FB"s newsfeed 2/4/19

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Daniel Braun (CAB Jourova) and met with Thomas Myrup Kristensen and Cecilia Zappala (Facebook Brussels), and John Hegman (Facebook VP Newsfeed), to discuss changes being made to Facebook's newsfeed intended to increase transparency and help users understand and control what they see.

Facebook's general aim is to introduce buttons on every post which appears on a user's newsfeed, which expose a few of the main factors used by Facebook's algorithms to make that post appear on the user's feed, and to give users some control over these factors. It was an opportunity to understand this step, and for the COM to ask questions and express concerns.

Facebook explained how newsfeed works: every user has an "inventory" of posts that they could potentially view, based on their friends and the individual poster's privacy settings. Every day, this means many thousands of potential posts on a user's newsfeed, which are then ranked by Facebook's algorithms, on the basis of criteria, which they call "signals". Facebook reckons that users will look at around 100-200 posts a day. The "signals" include the user's characteristics and interests, and the characteristics of the post – how popular it is with people in the user's circle of friends, how well people interact with it etc. On the basis of these signals, the algorithms make predictions about the likelihood that the user will interact with the post and how, and then this generates a score which determines the post's ranking "quality" – how near the top it will appear.

Facebook explained that its new policy to prioritise privacy is being achieved by promoting posts that are from a user's circle of friends, because these tend to result in "quality" interactions. Webpage loading speed is also a factor. Demotion of posts is also the means by which disinformation about vaccines is being combatted, as well as behaviours which do not meet its community rules.

Transparency about these "signals" is offered through a button "why am I seeing this post" which gives users information about the five main signals used to determine its position in the user's newsfeed. Users are also provided certain basic controls to prioritise/deprioritise posts from specific sources, as well as control other privacy preferences. Past interactions with a post can be reviewed, and a transparency report tool offers more information about how posts are targeted.

These tools are in addition to the similar "why am I seeing this ad" option, which is already available in paid for content (and Facebook stated that there is no cross-over between posts which are paid for, and posts which are ranked on the basis of the "signals" described above).

Facebook has tested these tools in focus groups in New York, Denver, Paris and Berlin. The began rolling it out yesterday, and expect to have them available worldwide by the end of May.

CAB asked whether the signals are actually representative of the main factors which cause a post to be ranked highly, how echo chambers are to be avoided and what this contributes to combatting disinformation and promoting quality information. CAB also queried how quality was

established, and what the language coverage was.

Facebook suggested that the signals revealed by the tool tended to be the key ones, but there were others and it was hard to quantify how representative they were. Regarding misinformation, this is a difficult issue, but they will exercise certain control – they will not allow users to select to be served content which is "harmful to society". They are researching for filter bubbles and the diversity of people's newsfeeds. Facebook is working with fact checkers (e.g. the WHO for the vaccine disinformation), including some who are affiliated with the media. Facebook intends to make its service available in all languages, and works with fact checkers in 23 languages. Regarding quality – once something is assessed as disinformation, it receives an 80% penalty to its ranking score.

CAB expressed that COM is concerned that Facebook and similar services act as channels and multipliers for disinformation, and value the steps that Facebook are taking to improve a media environment that they are chiefly responsible for having damaged in the first place.

JUST asked about the extent of testing and whether abuse of these tools had been observed, the possibility for information and reporting to be provided, e.g. to authorities, on the trends in user's interaction with this tool, as wells as with their newsfeeds, and about the criteria Facebook applies to assess what is "harmful to society", beyond what is illegal, and how rights are safeguarded.

Facebook explained that the tools had only just been rolled out to a few percent of users, and suggested that reporting on trends in use might be possible. Facebook want to work with external groups to understand the difficult question of what is harmful, and referring to Zuckerberg's recent op-ed, asked to work with governments to establish standards. They are already working with the high level expert group, which has also participated in the preparation of the COM's communication on trustworthy content.

CAB noted that it will issue this communication, which sets out a continuum on the issue of controlled speech, from the regulatory floor of illegal speech (such as incitement to violence), through to the voluntary frameworks, with recommendations for further steps to solidify some of this, for instance through the establishment of publisher liability, potentially by regulation.

Facebook is very willing to participate, and interested in these ideas, while bearing in mind important values such as free speech.

**European Commission** 

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