People are the Answer
Not Artificial Intelligence

By Jack Bandy

In 2023, layoffs and closures in US journalism sent an especially clear and worrying message. Besides demonstrating another year of ongoing decline, the 2023 data showed that tech-savvy news outlets were not immune to the crisis. *Vice* filed for bankruptcy, *BuzzFeed News* shut down entirely, and even the mighty *Washington Post* faced cuts.

Although there is no single factor that fully explains the journalism crisis in the US, it is worth giving special attention to technology's role. Most of the time that means "the role of technology companies." After Facebook and Google captured massive audiences using their products, these giant tech corporations started luring businesses who wanted to reach those people through advertising. Newspaper advertising struggled to compete with the targeted advertising promised by technology companies.

As tech companies captured advertising revenue from the news industry, they began to capture other parts of journalism as well. Their aggregation tools displayed headlines and article snippets from multiple news outlets, and readers drifted away from visiting news websites producing the news. Suddenly, much of the news consumption process was also in the hands of Big Tech.

Then came algorithmic ranking. Google moved from a straightforward "PageRank" algorithm to an opaque algorithm that uses 200+ signals to order search results. Facebook started showing posts based on expected engagement, giving posts an extra boost for each "angry" reaction. Similarly, Twitter moved from chronologically-ordered timelines to personalized feeds, and even Apple News, which promised to put "humans over machines," included an algorithmic "Trending Stories" section.

Besides shifts in the quantity and quality of the news that people read, perhaps the most important consequence is the growing power technology companies wield over so many journalistic processes. They have come for news consumption and news distribution, all the while suggesting that newsrooms simply need to learn and adapt to new technology. But even newsrooms premised on technological adaptation have proven unsustainable.

There will likely be a new wave of challenges with "generative AI" tools. For example, Google promises journalists that their artificial intelligence (AI) tools can aid in the process of news production. Journalists can decide for themselves if and how they will adopt these tools, but we should resist the optimistic narrative from technology companies that AI is here to help. There

graphic: Hill Consulting

are several reasons for this.

The first reason is that Big Tech companies like Facebook, Apple, and Google have been sharing the "technology as savior" narrative for decades. And yet, journalism remains in dire crisis. Aggregators did not help, algorithmic ranking did not help, the pivot to video did not help. Why would AI be any different?

A second reason we should resist this techno-optimistic narrative is that it masks the real purpose and value of journalism, which is not just the words they produce, but the processes of accountability that they practice. This includes the knowledgeable reporter attending city hall meetings and the editor thinking every day about important events in the area.

There are no silver bullets or quick fixes. You can subscribe to your local news organization and ask your friends to do the same, but we need long-term, structural changes if we want a truly informed public that is capable of self-governance amidst ever-evolving technology. Just as we do with public schools, public roads, and public libraries, we must decide that our communities need information and accountability, regardless of how profitable the endeavor may be.

This is a long game, and it cannot be won with the same individualistic, neoliberal logic that created the crisis. But if we commit to a collective approach, however small it may start and however long it may take, we can slowly work our way toward informed communities.

Hyperlinks for this article at https://bit.ly/47cSMA0

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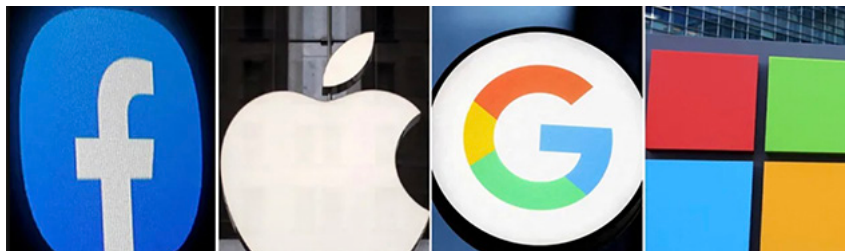
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