

Mark Zuckerberg is caught trapping its users in 'filter bubbles' on Facebook in order to steer election results

- Facebook faces the blow-back of being a big corporation, like Sony Pictures, who tried to control elections and Washington laws and suffered the ire of the public.

- “Filter Bubbles”, “Mood Manipulation”, “Search Rigging”, “Adjacent Positioning”, “Subliminal Messages” and other psychological tricks used by Twitter/Google/Facebook called into question



- [Rob Price](#)



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaking to analysts on the company's Q2 2016 earnings call.
(Maybe.)REUTERS/Scanpix/Keld Navntoft

Facebook-A \$125.23

FB +/-6.47 %-4.90

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Mark Zuckerberg doesn't think Facebook is trapping users in a bubble.

There's a popular theory around social media called the "filter bubble." It's the idea that as users naturally subscribe and follow other users that share their interests, they get trapped in a self-reinforcing feedback loop: All they see is more information that "confirms" their beliefs, while dissenting opinions get filtered out.

Sorting algorithms, which show the user what they supposed want to see, only reinforce this "bubble" — cutting off users from the real world.

On Wednesday, Facebook reported its second-quarter earnings for 2016. ([It smashed it](#), beating Wall Street's expectations on just about every important metric.) On a call with analysts afterwards, one asked CEO Mark Zuckerberg whether he believes this "filter bubble" hinders communication ([transcript via Seeking Alpha](#)):

"Mark, how do you think about this line of thought that because people see things that they are already in line with what they believe, communication is hindered?"

Zuck's response was to shoot down the theory altogether. Here's what he said, emphasis ours:

"So we have studied the effect that you're talking about, and published **the results of our research that show that Facebook is actually, and social media in general, are the most diverse forms of media that are out there.** And basically what – the way to think about this is that, even if a lot of your friends come from the same kind of background or have the same political or religious beliefs, if you know a couple of hundred people, there's a good chance that even maybe a small percent, maybe 5% or 10% or 15% of them will have different viewpoints, which means that their perspectives are now going to be shown in your News Feed.

"And if you compare that to traditional media where people will typically pick a newspaper or a TV station that they want to watch and just get 100% of the view from that, people are actually getting exposed to much more different kinds of content through social media than they would have otherwise or have been in the past. So **it's a good sounding theory, and I can get why people repeat it, but it's not true.** So I think that that's something that if folks read the research that we put out there, then they'll see that."

Not everyone agrees with Facebook's research



A man with a giant balloon on his head. (We think.)Getty / Drew Angerer (notice the woman with no mouth, behind him)

In short Mark Zuckerberg argues: There's no filter bubble — especially when compared to traditional media. Users' feeds are more diverse in opinions than if they were looking at other sources.

The 32-year-old CEO is likely referring to a peer-reviewed study put out by Facebook in 2015, which asserted that — contrary to the filter bubble theory — users see plenty of media on the social network that runs counter to their beliefs. "An average of almost 29 percent of the news stories displayed by Facebook's News Feed also appear to present views that conflict with the user's own ideology," [The New York Times reported at the time](#).

But not everyone agreed with the results of the survey. Academic Zeynep Tufekci was critical of the sample of users Facebook chose to focus on: "The research was conducted on a small, skewed subset of Facebook users who chose to self-identify their political affiliation on Facebook and regularly log on to Facebook, about ~4% of the population available for the study."



Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and CSO Alex Stamos attend the company's annual shareholders' meeting. (Or something.)Reuters

This, [she wrote in a post on Medium](#), is not going to be reflective of the majority of Facebook users. "People who self-identify their politics are almost certainly going to behave quite differently, on average, than people who do not, when it comes to the behavior in question which is sharing and clicking through ideologically challenging content. So, everything in this study applies *only* to that small subsample of unusual people."

Tufekci added: "The study is still interesting, and important, but it is not a study that can generalize to Facebook users. Hopefully that can be a future study."

So while actively political users may retain a more diverse news feed, she argues, that's not necessarily true of the majority of "ordinary" Facebook users who don't actively try to challenge themselves politically.

Users need to take responsibility for their choices — but so does Facebook

No-one is entirely blameless in this. If users aren't actively seeking out opposing viewpoints, then it's little surprise they don't see any. But at the same time, it's obvious that Facebook's algorithms — trained to show users only the most perfect, *engaging* content for them — are going to pander to users' confirmation bias.

This isn't helped by the fact that the general public are largely clueless about how Facebook's news feed even works, [with "folk theories" circulating about it that can be wildly divergent from the truth](#). If users don't understand Facebook's mechanisms, it's questionable as to whether they can make informed decisions when using it.

This isn't an abstract academic debate. Facebook is becoming the dominant platform for news distribution across the globe, far more powerful than any single media outlet. If users don't understand why they're seeing certain posts and not others, and how the decisions of Facebook's algorithms can shape the civic discourse, then that's a problem.

Here's a transcript of the question, [courtesy of Seeking Alpha](#):

Carlos Kirjner-Neto - Sanford C. Bernstein & Co. LLC

Hi. Thanks for taking my question. First, some people believe that much of what users see in their News Feed is driven by their behavior and preferences. And as a consequence, the stories they end up seeing are always, or almost always, in line with their existing views and preferences. Does this phenomenon in the end increase – does this phenomenon lead to increased adoption in use of Facebook creating more polarization of views and less effective communication, at least in some areas of people's lives? Mark, how do you think about this line of thought that because people see things that they are already in line with what they believe, communication is hindered? Second, when it comes to video ad formats, are you philosophically opposed to pre-rolls, and if yes, why? And if not, what is missing for you to adopt that? Thank you.

Mark Elliot Zuckerberg - Founder, Chairman & Chief Executive Officer

So we have studied the effect that you're talking about, and published the results of our research that show that Facebook is actually, and social media in general, are the most diverse forms of media that are out there. And basically what – the way to think about this is that, even if a lot of your friends come from the same kind of background or have the same political or religious beliefs, if you know a couple of hundred people, there's a good chance that even maybe a small percent, maybe 5% or 10% or 15% of them will have different viewpoints, which means that their perspectives are now going to be shown in your News Feed.

And if you compare that to traditional media where people will typically pick a newspaper or a TV station that they want to watch and just get 100% of the view from that, people are actually getting exposed to much more different kinds of content through social media than they would have otherwise or have been in the past. So it's a good sounding theory, and I can get why people repeat it, but it's not true. So I think that that's something that if folks read the research that we put out there, then they'll see that.