

Worried ‘bout your health? Facebook won’t let you forget. Research by Panoptykon Foundation

Facebook competes for users’ attention by exploiting its knowledge of their anxieties and weaknesses, and the buttons which are supposed to hide unwanted content do not work as they promise. A new study by the Panoptykon Foundation led by Piotr Sapieżyński, PhD, of Northeastern University (Boston) is out.

The waterfall of unwanted “suggested” content

Panoptykon and Sapieżyński studied the case of a user complaining her Facebook feed is flooded with unwanted content. She pointed out the “suggested for you” content as especially unsettling. During the two months of study 2500 posts were “suggested” to Joanna*. More than 56 percent of it (1416 posts – on average 27 posts a day) belonged to the thematic categories Joanna labelled as unwanted.

- “They came back from their dream vacation. They died within 4 hours of each other”.
- “He fell to the pavement and perished. Young man dead”.
- “She noticed a scratch on her breast. A fight for her life began”.
- “This 29-year-old complained of back pain. It was a symptom of inoperable lung cancer”.
- “Itchy armpits? One cause is especially dangerous”.
- “This ache may be a sign of an aneurysm. Watch out, it’s a ticking time bomb”.

These are just a few examples of unsettling content related to the sudden death of young people, alarming physical signs, or seemingly trivial symptoms of terminal diseases fed to Joanna by Facebook every single day.

“Hide post” button isn’t working

Facebook users have a variety of options at their disposal to control their feed. In theory, they can train the algorithm responsible for selecting the content to be presented to them, what topics are and what aren’t interesting. For instance, you don’t like children – you don’t want to see parental content. Joanna, who is struggling with health anxiety, would prefer not to be served with so much content related to diseases.

The study showed however that using the “hide post” button does not change a thing.

„For one week I clicked »Hide post – See fewer posts like this« button next to each single post related to death or disease. Then I stopped and waited for results. I would log into Facebook hoping that my feedback will finally translate into an effect and these posts wouldn’t be there anymore. But it never happened” – says Joanna. „Often, I would see a dozen or so posts over a week or two talking about the same freak accident, the same murder, the same death. I’m receiving information about a single murder case three different times, and then three different times again, and I click: I don’t want this type of content, then I would expect that at least I’m not going to get another post referring to that specific story. Well, it turned out it’s not working that way”.

Why Facebook persists to present unwanted content to its users’?

What seems obvious to Joanna, is oblivious to Facebook for one reason. The job of Facebook algorithms is to engage users and clicking the “hide post” button is another way of being engaged. Dr. Piotr Sapieżyński explains:

„The user indeed gave her feedback that she is not interested in particular content. But the history of her behaviour remained similar to that of other users who engaged with this kind of content. And so Facebook’s algorithm infers that since the content is engaging for her, she wants to see it. And it serves more and more of it” – explains Sapieżyński. “That’s how Facebook algorithms of trauma work”.

Joanna Flis, addiction therapist, quotes a study conducted at the University of Arkansas: “Spending five hours on social media a day significantly heightens the risk of suffering from an anxiety disorder. And not just in people who suffered this type of disorders before, but also in healthy individuals. No nervous system will remain neutral when faced with an excess of content centred around the loss of health and life”.

Facebook though doesn't carry a "don't use longer than" label and people of every age are constantly connected to it. This must leave a mark on the society as a whole.

Is DSA going to protect us from the algorithms of trauma?

Social harms caused by very large online platforms (VLOPs), such as Facebook, have been noticed by the European Union. The new EU regulation was brought to live in order to curb this phenomenon: the Digital Services ACT (DSA). As of August 2023 VLOPs have new obligations. Among others, they are to map out the risks to public health, fundamental rights, or democratic processes which stem from the design or functioning of their services. Recommender systems (algorithms applied to select which content will be presented to each user) are one of the sources of such risks.

“According to the DSA, very large online platforms not only have to assess systemic risks on a regular basis but also come up with adequate mitigation measures. In other words: it is now the job of big companies to explore the implications of their business model for individual users, and for society. We are talking about serious risks to mental health and wellbeing, public discourse, democratic processes and so on. The platforms should, among others, offer their users alternative version of the recommender system, which is not based on profiling” – explains Katarzyna Szymielewicz, president of Panoptykon Foundation. “Joanna tried to change her feed using control tools made available by Facebook. Such options are not compulsory under the DSA, but if a platform decided to introduce them, all control tools should be working” – she argues. However, at least during the study (which was performed in June and July 2023) they were not. Did it change after 25 August? Panoptykon already announced they will repeat the study early next year to verify it.

Szymielewicz is convinced that the European Commission [responsible for executing the DSA] should inspect the negative impact of the recommender systems used by the largest platforms. “It's no longer about better personalisation of content or ads. For vulnerable users across the globe, including those who suffer from depression or anxiety, it's a struggle to survive this social experiment”.

* the name has been changed

Copyrights: Panoptykon Foundation.

Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0. Please indicate the source while copying (Panoptykon Foundation, panoptykon.org).

Panoptykon Foundation is fighting for fundamental rights and freedoms in the surveillance society.