



UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

Issue 5/22 (May)

Social Media Platform Changes and its Implications

INTRODUCTION

1. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are widely used by many people around the world. While these platforms emphasise on ‘freedom of speech’ as part of their operating model, questions regarding the platforms’ role in accelerating disinformation have been raised.
2. Another issue that such social media platforms face is the opacity surrounding their algorithms. According to *Times of India* and *The New York Times*, governments and relevant authorities have been putting pressure on social media companies to be more transparent in revealing how their platforms’ algorithms work – especially how they determine the type of content to be pushed to users’ newsfeeds.
3. Twitter and Meta have announced or taken steps to improve transparency on how their social media platforms operate, such as disclosing how their News Feed or timeline algorithms work. Users and agencies that are concerned with the spread of divisive or even malicious content on these platforms would need to study the implications and impact of these changes to the social media platforms.

Notable Changes in Social Media Platforms

4. On 25 Apr 2022, Twitter announced it had accepted Tesla CEO Elon Musk's buyout offer of \$44 billion, making him the new owner of the platform. According to *Business Insider*, Musk has since announced plans to further loosen content moderation by adding new features, modifying the algorithms, eliminating spam bots and authenticating all accounts. He also plans to charge a fee for commercial and government users. However, according to *CNBC*, he made a statement on 13 May 2022 to put his purchase 'on hold' as he wanted to analyse the proportion of fake and spam accounts on Twitter to assess whether his promise of getting rid of all 'annoying spam bots' could be achieved.

5. Prior to Musk's purchase, *Global News* reported that Twitter had crafted rules and invested in staff and technology to detect content containing violent threats, harassment and misinformation that violated its policies. Musk's plans to change the rules of Twitter would overturn the previous rules and system, turning Twitter into a platform that prioritises free speech over all else.

6. In addition, Musk's takeover of Twitter may herald the end of the opacity of Twitter's black box algorithm¹. According to *CBS News*, Musk suggested posting Twitter's algorithms on Github² to increase its transparency as opposed to having an undisclosed black box algorithm.

7. Similarly, according to *Analytics India Magazine*, Meta recently released a new language model, named *Open Pretrained Transformer* (OPT-175B), with the aim of improving researchers' understanding of Large Language Models³ (LLMs). The release of the model would allow for greater transparency as it would enable researchers to study how such models are developed as well as the associated problems. Such research is crucial as LLMs were, according to *MIT Technology Review*, increasingly being incorporated into digital products and services such as social media content moderation and cloud-based work software.

¹ A black box algorithm is an impenetrable system with algorithms consisting of millions of data points taken as inputs that correlate to specific data features to produce an output.

² Github is a platform for housing and sharing software codes.

³ Large Language Models are powerful programs that can generate paragraphs of text and mimic human conversation. However, they have deep flaws such as parroting misinformation, prejudice and toxic language.

Implications

8. According to *CNN Business*, the public disclosure of Twitter's algorithm would encourage greater accountability. Similarly, researchers and other experts lauded Meta's release of the OPT-175B as a step in the correct direction towards greater transparency. These developments may also encourage other social media platforms to adopt similar best practices and standards.

9. However, there could be significant risks associated with the disclosure of social media platforms' algorithms online. According to *CNN Business*, Twitter's competitors could copy and roll out Twitter's algorithms as part of their own products. Malicious actors could also exploit the vulnerabilities in Twitter's algorithm. In the same vein, *Wired* reported that access to knowledge of Twitter's algorithms would make it easier for certain actors to "game the system" and unfairly boost their content to gain prominence over others.

10. In addition, *CNBC* reported that Musk's emphasis on free speech as Twitter's primary business principle could help proliferate malicious content like white supremacist propaganda, racial and religious hatred, discrimination, and election disinformation.

ASSESSMENT

11. With the ever-changing policies and algorithms of social media platforms, it behoves tech giants to be more transparent with their algorithms so that information on these platforms could be better moderated to contain the spread of malicious content.

12. Agencies like *Future of India Foundation* have proposed transparency laws that social media platforms should follow. Former President of the United States, Barack Obama, had also called for increased transparency around the design of tech platforms and for the US Congress to consider reforms such as competition laws and amendments to Section 230⁴, which would allow for content moderation and protect platforms from liability for users' posts. It is ultimately for governments and relevant institutions to work with social media companies to ensure that changes to the platforms' algorithms do not hinder users from having a safe and positive experience on social media.

CONTACT DETAILS

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