Google's Top Stories and the Fairness Doctrine: Unbalanced Amplification of Far-Right News Sources

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Abstract

Google's Top stories is a component of Google Search that frequently surfaces current news when a user performs a search. Our one-year long audit of Google's search results for the candidates of the 2020 US Presidential Elections indicated that the composition of the Top stories panel shows an unbalanced amplification of far-right news publishers.

Introduction

In their book "Network Propaganda" (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018), the authors consider a set of actors and technological drivers that have been identified as causing the present state of information disorder, among others, "fake news" entrepreneurs, political clickbait fabricators; Russian hackers, bots, and sockpuppets; the Facebook Newsfeed algorithm and online echochambers; Cambridge Analytica; and white supremacists and alt-right trolls. Ultimately, they settle on the right-wing media ecosystem as "the primary culprit in sowing confusion and distrust in the broader American media ecosystem." Their analysis is based on three sources of data: the open web, Facebook news sharing, and Twitter news sharing. Although the book doesn't address the question of how people access news on the Web, it appears to suggest the primacy of social media in this respect. In the aftermath of the 2016 US Election, Facebook made changes to its news feed algorithm that reduced the amount of referral traffic to other websites. Thus, since 2017, search engines have directed more traffic to news websites than social media.[1]

As the amount of search engine referrals to news sources increases, it is worth investigating what news is shown by search engines. Since 2016, Google, the most used search engine, has modified its search results page (SERP) interface to show Top stories, a panel of up to 10 headlines accompanied by images, near the top of the SERP. When the search term concerns events or people in the news, Top stories is the first element of the page shown on mobile and desktop devices. Given that thousands of stories from thousands of news sources are written daily, by selecting only a few of them at a time, Google's Top stories is engaging in what is known as "algorithmic news curation" (Diakopoulos 2019).

If algorithms are curating news, what choices are they making, especially with respect to news sources with problematic credibility? Concretely, are the right-wing publications identified in (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) as the cause of our current information disorder (pre- and post-2016 US Election) being promoted by Google Top stories? Does that apply to left-wing publications?
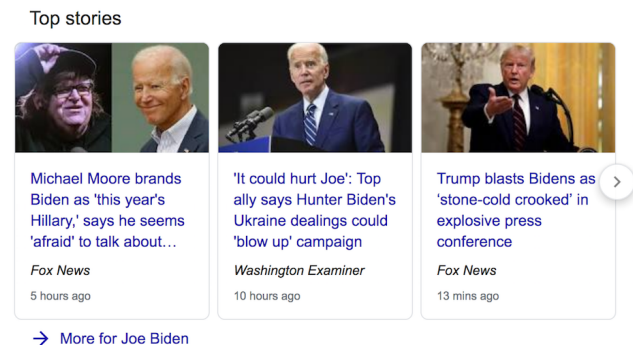

Figure 1: Google's Top stories panel for Joe Biden on Oct 2, 2019. All three stories are from news sources considered as "right-wing" or "far-right" (partisan audience bias > 0.5).

This line of research, which falls under the umbrella of algorithm auditing (Sandvig et al. 2014), is important for two reasons: 1) more people use search engines than social media on a daily basis. If they are being exposed to news in this way, we need to understand how algorithms are curating the news; 2) there is evidence that as many as half of all search queries don't lead to clicks,[2] because a user's information need is fulfilled by the SERP content. Thus, the news headlines that a user sees in Top stories might be all they remember about a news event. Taken together, these headlines can frame issues in a partisan way and help with media agenda setting. To exemplify, Google's Top news panel on Figure 1

[1]https://www.businessinsider.com/search-engines-more-traffic-publishers-social-media-2017-2018-2

[2]https://searchengineland.com/49-of-all-google-searches-are-no-click-study-finds-318426

shows an occasion in which all three headlines are from far-right news sources, and critical of candidate Joe Biden.

Data

We have been auditing Google's Top stories for the coverage of the 2020 US Presidential Elections since December 2018 (Kawakami, Umarova, and Mustafaraj 2020). Although we have data for 30 candidates, we focus here only on the top five Democratic candidates and the incumbent president, Donald Trump. Our auditing system has captured the list (and ordering) of ten top stories multiple times a day. Approximately, we collected 80,000 news articles from 2,168 news sources. We then use the Partisan Audience Bias scores dataset (Robertson et al. 2018) to assign a partisanship score to news sources. The scores are between -1 (far left) to +1 (far right). For example, *Breitbart News* has a score of 0.74 and *LGTBQ Nation* a score of -0.77. To simplify our analysis, sources with scores (-1, -0.5) are labeled as "far left", those in (-0.5, 0.0) as "center left", those in (0.0, +0.5) as "center right", and those in (+0.5, +1) as "far right". These numbers reflect the partisanship of their audience and might not be an objective measure of the news sources bias.

Results

For each of the four categories above, we calculated the proportion of occurrences of news articles from corresponding news outlets. The results are summarized in Table 1. What is important to notice here is the dominance of the "center left" sources (which is known as mainstream media) especially for Donald Trump, as well as the disproportionate amount of far-right media coverage, especially for the front-runner Democratic candidate, Joe Biden.

Candidate	FL	CL	CR	FR
Donald Trump	8.7%	64.9%	17.6%	8.3%
Joe Biden	9.0%	51.9%	16.1%	22.1%
Bernie Sanders	15.2%	50.4%	18.0%	14.3%
Elizabeth Warren	11.5%	53.5%	19.3%	14.6%
Amy Klobuchar	8.8%	57.2%	17.2%	12.7%
Pete Buttigieg	10.7%	52.9%	21.1%	11.6%

Table 1: The proportion of Top stories' news articles for four groups of partisan audience bias: FL - Far Left, CL - Center Left, CR - Center Right, FR - Far Right.

This unbalanced coverage of Joe Biden is captured better in Figure 2, which shows the stark contrast between all four groups of media. There was a reason for this: Joe Biden was seen as the candidate who was most likely to beat President Trump in the election. Thus, news outlets who support the president focused on aggressively covering Biden's candidacy. Meanwhile, far-left sources focused more on Bernie Sanders, given his political ageenda.

Discussion

Is Google's Top stories algorithm reflecting user's demand for news; the uneven supply from the news publishers; or trying to impose the so-called "fairness doctrine" (Simmons
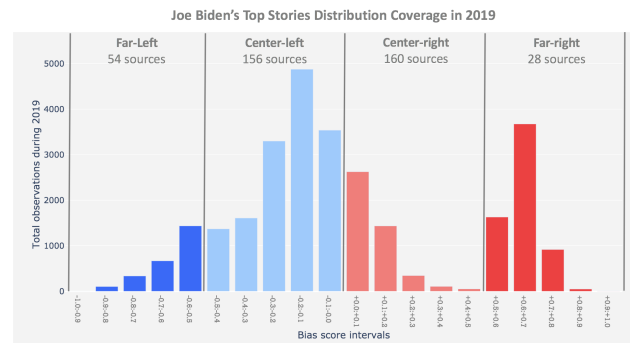

Figure 2: Distribution of articles volume by various news outlets in the partisan audience bias spectrum for Joe Biden's Google searches. Notice the disproportionate far-right coverage by 28 news sources.

1978), which was a policy implemented in the United States from 1949-1987, demanding from broadcasters the coverage of opposing views. Since overall there are fewer far-right news sources compared to the rest of the field, they are disproportionately represented in Top stories. Should that be considered fair? Given the findings from (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) on the role that the *Breitbart*-led right-wing news ecosystem played in the 2016 US election, setting the news agenda, by focusing on immigration fears and alleged Clinton's corruption, our results indicate a possible scenario repetition. Thus, we invite discussion on the principles that should underlie algorithmic news curation.

Acknowledgments

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