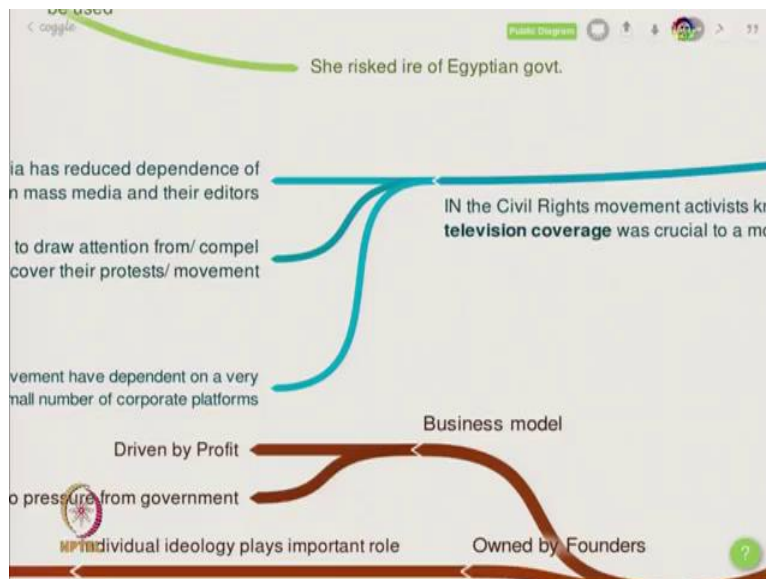
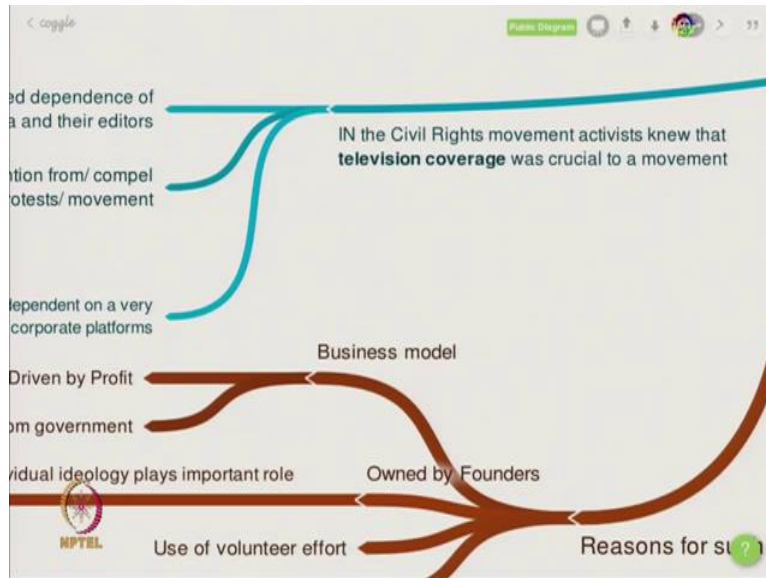


Text, Textuality and Digital Media
Professor Arjun Ghosh
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Delhi
Lecture 30

Zeynep Tufekci: Twitter and Facebook Part 2

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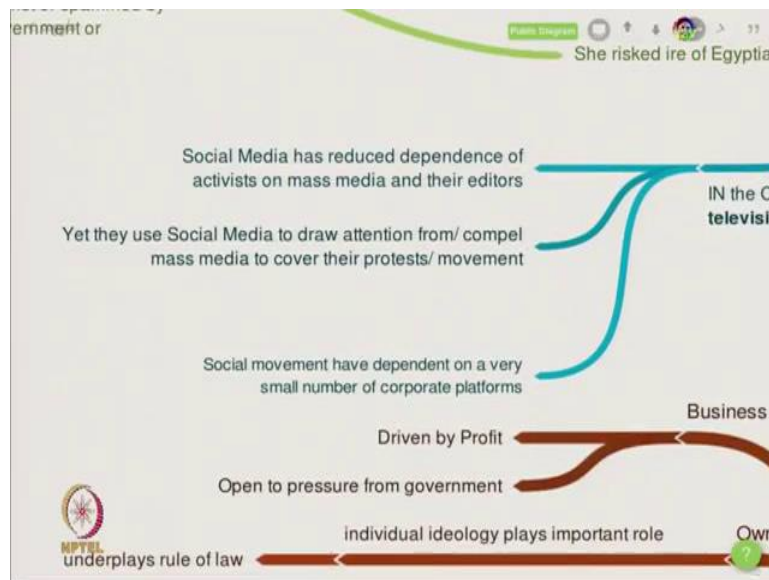


Going back to the Civil rights movement, the history of the Civil rights Movement in USA in 1950's and 60's. The movement, she says this is the pre social media era, pre internet era, where organisation, building an organisation, slow building an organisation plays a major role. She says that the Civil rights movement activist knew that television coverage is crucial to a movement and so they would they will try to reach out.

In fact, for activist and others, there is this process of producing press releases, every evening they would send out press releases to various newspapers or television channels inviting them or hold press conferences. Now slowly it is the news media who gather what is happening according to Twitter activity, the Twitter trends sort of tells people what is it that people are talking about the hashtag takes over and hashtag activism becomes important.

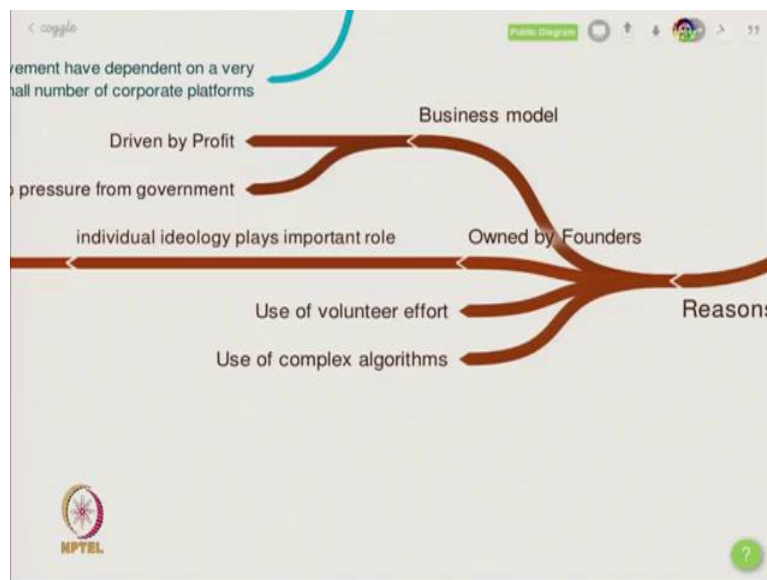
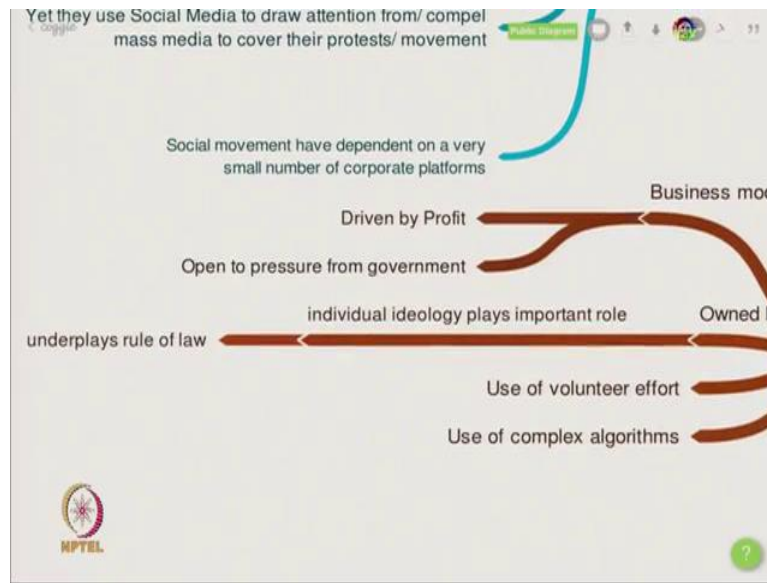
If you really want to gather the attention of the media, what many people would do, would take Tweet and then create an hashtag of activism, say ok at 7 p.m. all of us are going to tweet using this hashtag and that starts trending and then the traditional media catches it.

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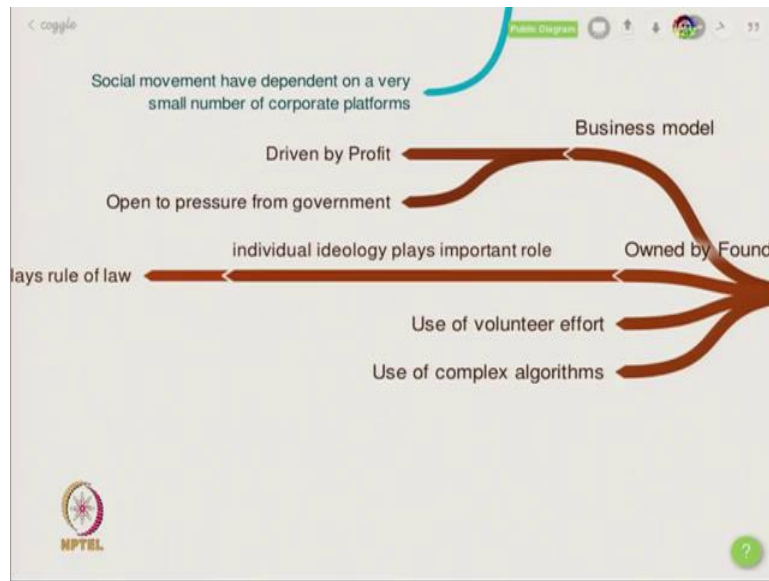
And so social media has reduced the dependence of activists on mass media and their editors and they use social media to draw attention or compel the mass media to cover their protest movements and others.

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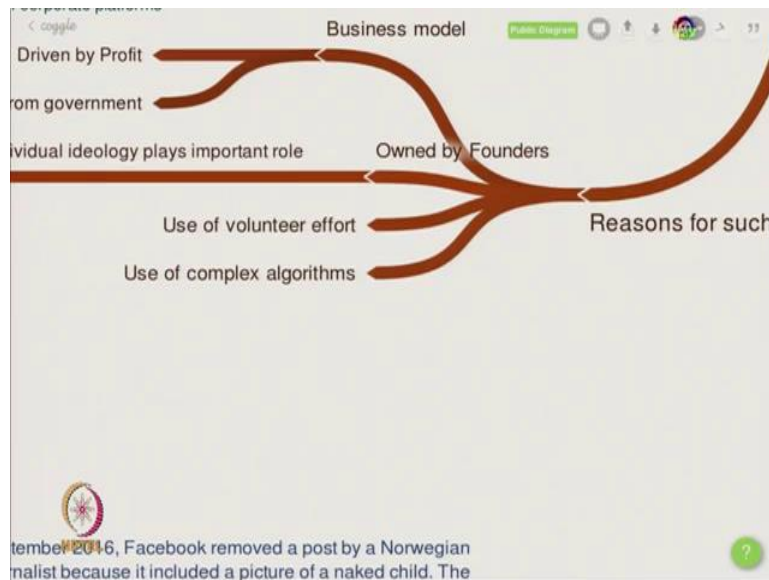
But the point is that the very social media platforms, they are corporate. And the kind of policies that they follow is because of the certain kind of ownership. These are owned by the founders whose individual ideology of the owner of that platform plays a very important role. And sometimes they can make, because this is a privately owned thing, so when you use WhatsApp or Facebook, the owner actually can decide what the rules are and say that I will allow this or I will not allow this within the ambit of the law, but can create something more than the law. And what they will or they will not allow is on the basis of a certain policy of the media organisation and not according to a certain law.

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And the business model is something that is driven by profit, and because it is driven by profit it is open to pressure from government the similar way in which copyright actually operated. Because the printers wanted to ensure their profit, they had to, they have to agree to the governments diktats on censorship. So similarly here they are driven by profit.

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And because the extent and the amounts of text and content that are added to these platforms every second are so large there is no centralized mechanism for actually controlling it, so they either rely on complex algorithms or use volunteer effort.

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Facebook removed a post by a Norwegian journalist because it included a picture of a naked child. The Pulitzer Prize-winning 1972 photo showing a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, running naked and screaming "Too hot, too hot," having just been badly burned by a napalm attack.

Videos of Westerners murdered at the hands of ISIS were removed fairly quickly, while similar videos of executions of local Syrians, Iraqis, or Libyans often remained on YouTube.

The page of the mayor of the biggest majority Kurdish city in the world was taken down before it was taken down. The page of a deputy (parliamentary official).

Case Studies

In September 2016, Facebook removed a post by a Norwegian journalist because it included a picture of a naked child. The picture was the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1972 photo showing a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, running naked and screaming "Too hot, too hot," having just been badly burned by a napalm attack.

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Book page of the mayor of the biggest majority Kurdish city in the world was taken down before it was taken down.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Thi_Kim_Phuc#/media/File:TrangBang.jpg

Phan Thi Kim Phuc - Wikipedia - Mozilla Firefox

Group of children and soldiers moving on foot away from a distant cloud of smoke ...

More details

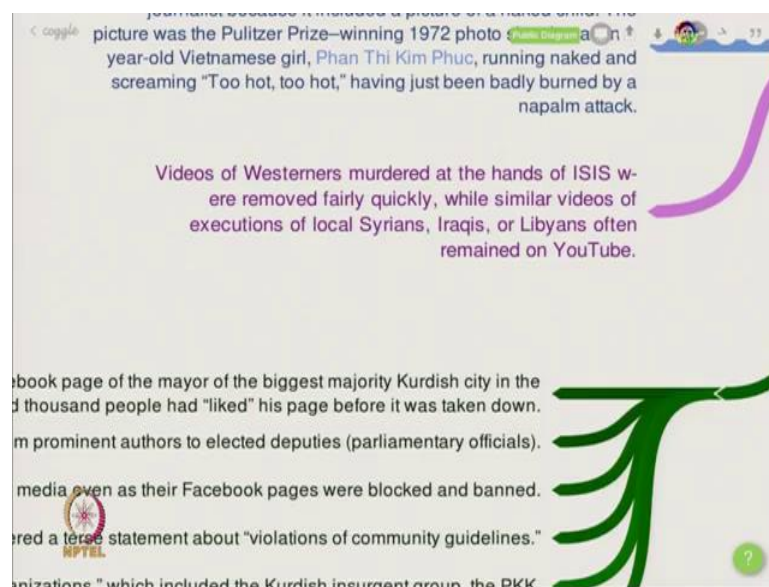
Huynh Cong Ut (also known as Nick Ut) - Widely

Fair use view

And Tufekci actually looks at some of these algorithms and how they operate in some cases. He says that on September 2016, Facebook removed the post by a Norwegian journalist because it included the picture of a naked child which was an award winning photograph. Some of you may recall this photograph of a Vietnamese child naked who is running away from napalm bomb dropped on Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

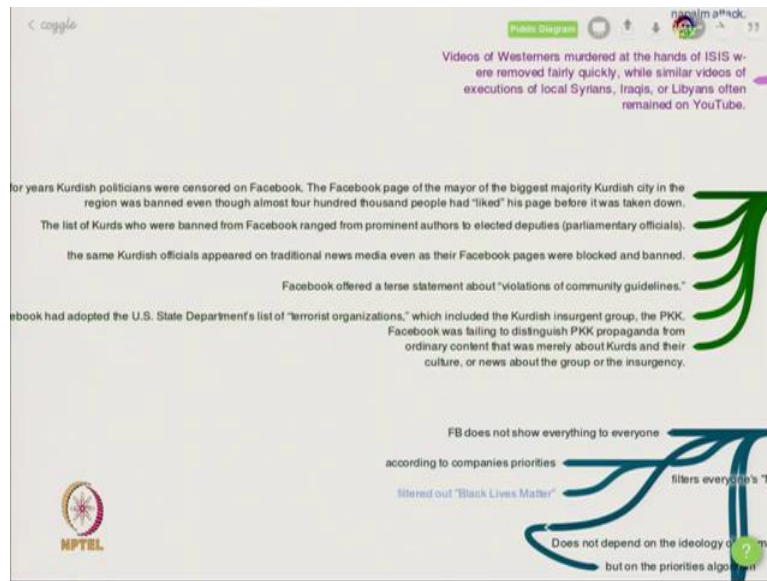
And Facebook of course, the algorithm picked it up, the image recognition algorithm picked it up and figured out this is nudity and therefore deleted it. So you have this kind of a situation where the algorithm is not able to judge what is, what can be, artistic, what can be political or what is sheer obscenity.

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And the videos of westerners murdered at the hands of ISIS were removed fairly quickly while similar videos of execution of local Syrians or Iraqis, or Libyans often remained on YouTube because they escape the attention of either the algorithm or the community policing mechanism. A very important example is the case of the shooter on Friday prayer in New Zealand recently, where the mass shooting was live telecast on social media by the murderer and the terrorist. And it continued to remain online for many hours before it could be taken off, which is a major breach of the policing mechanism that they have.

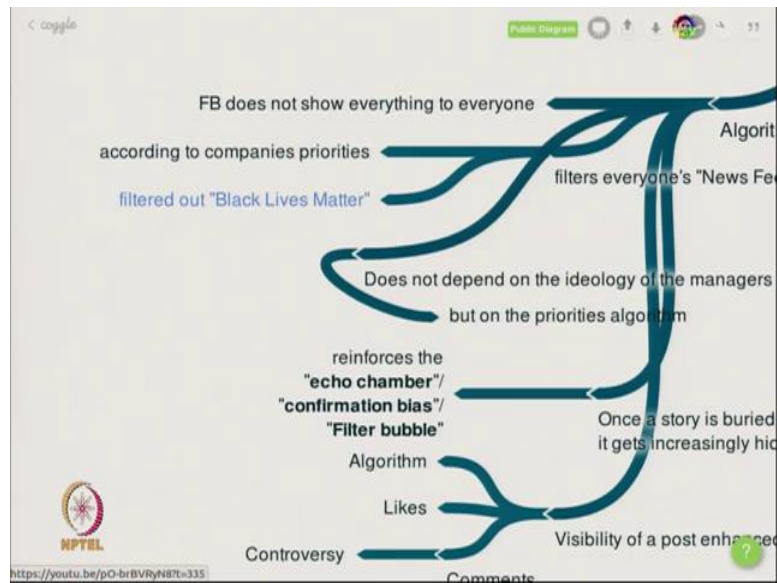
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She looks at another example of a particular case, where Kurdish politicians were censored on Facebook and the mayor of the biggest Kurdish city was banned, although almost 400 thousand people had liked his page picture before it was taken out and he was elected leader. So, and one did not know why this is happening and the people who, some of the Kurds who were banned from Facebook were prominent authors and elected representatives of people.

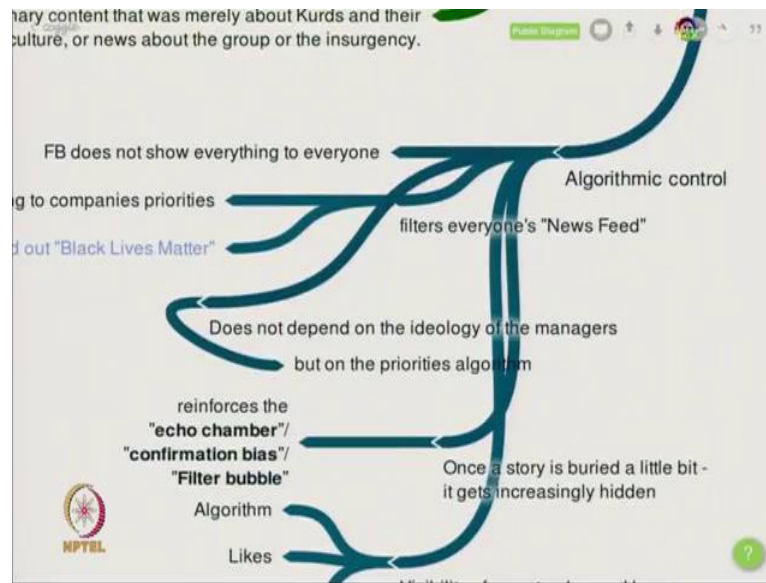
And these officials continued to appear on traditional news media even as their Facebook pages were banned and one did not figure out why, and when one questioned, Facebook issued a statement about violations on community guidelines. Further investigation figured out that what Facebook had done, is they had basically adopted the United States government's department of state, they had a list of terrorist organization in which included a Kurdish insurgent group the PKK. So the Facebook algorithm was failing to distinguish between PKK propaganda from the ordinary content that was merely about Kurds and their culture or news about their groups or insurgency. So these are so because the algorithm may not have been written very well. I will give you another example of where this happened.

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The Amarnath Yatra that happens in Kashmir, I looked at some of the Facebook posts on it and if I translate it, I look at that translation and that which is provided to for the Amarnath Yatra posts on Facebook. When I look at the translation, I find the word Yatra is translated as Haj. Now, obviously what is happening is, may be the Bangla that they are speaking where they are using where pilgrimage, the Yatra in this particular case is a pilgrimage, and pilgrimage in the dominant use of the Bangla language which is from Bangladesh is the word Haj. And the algorithm is not able to distinguish between the two forms of pilgrimage. And therefore, translating the Amarnath Yatra to the Haj. And so these kind of things do happen and they can have very serious effects.

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And this algorithm in control which she talks about and this is where I want to talk about, if you look at Facebook, there are two kinds of feeds which can possibly be there and that is the browser interface of Facebook. You can either look at the latest feeds or you can look at the news feeds and the top feeds. And it is usually the top feeds which are the dominant ones, which is default and in fact on the mobile interface I find that there is no option to change the option to the latest.

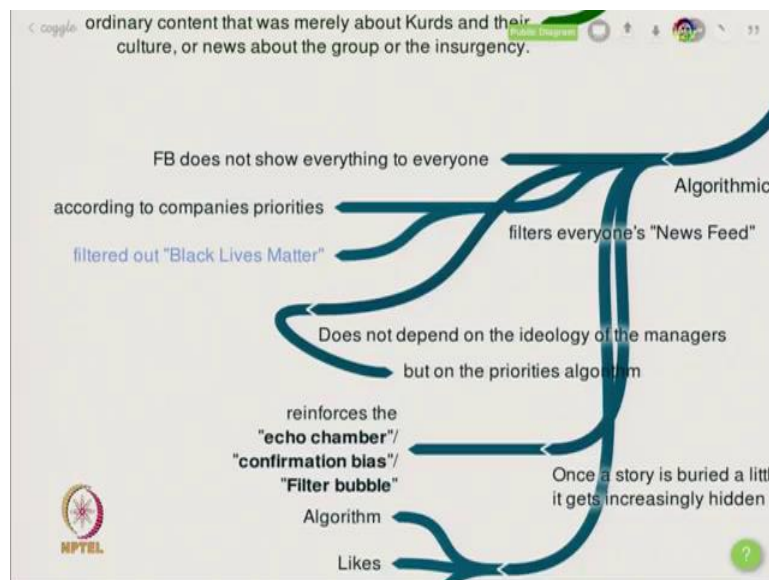
And so what does this do? What is happening? And this is something that we discussed when we look at Google News or any other such platform or even on Amazon. What they do is that they try to study your own behaviour and figure out what are the kinds of things that you like and try to push that kind of content more towards you. Therefore because on platforms such as Facebook, the longer that you keep watching, this is called click baiting, the longer that you stick to the page, the more likely that you will be watching some of the advertisement, the longer time you spend on it, and that would mean more revenue for the particular house.

So profit become a very important motive and it motivates the platform to keep pushing content towards you, content that you are already viewed earlier. And this creates what is called a filter bubble, that means it will constantly suggest to you things that you have already read or you have already read on, or you have already commented upon, or you posted, or your liked and they will try to show you those things. If there is a contrary opinion or something different that will get relegated to the back burner.

And it leads to something like a called an echo chamber or confirmation bias. You know that reinforces one's own biases and they get amplified and you would think that it is the only thing that is that the World is hearing, that we are hearing around. And what we find is that this is similar, but at much much mega scale so infinitely more significant, is that we had when we had talked about the various manuscript circulation channels or oral circulation journals, where the community which is reading a certain manuscript is a very small one and that leads to a certain kind of confirmation bias.

So once again we find that the human behaviour is moving away from the analytical. When we looked at Nicholas Carr's idea of distracted reading you know we looked at how in case of distracted reading the mind is no longer able to analyse and understand and comprehend. But this is another aspect where analytical or rational ways of thinking are sort of moving into the back burner. Because, the World that is around us we only see, we only note that which we already believe in, our assumptions are thrown back at us because the platform is chasing our page view time and wants to keep us on the platform all the time, that is what the algorithm is controlled. So Facebook does not show everyone everything.

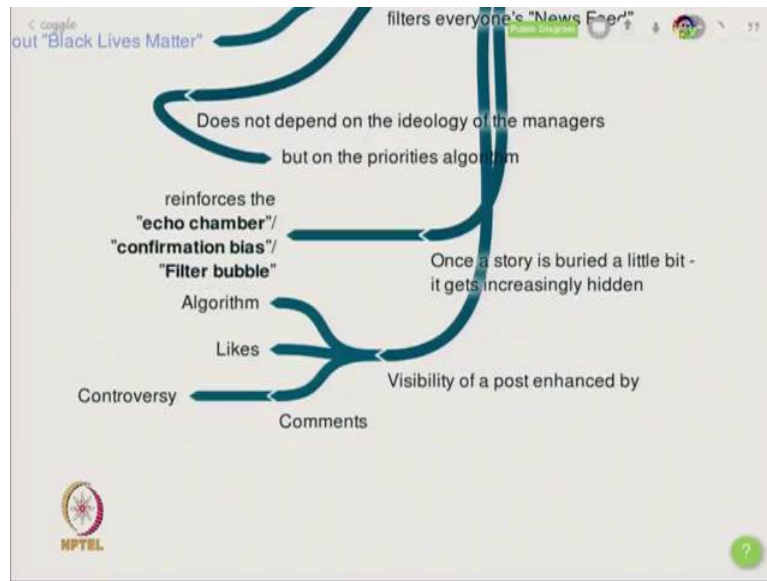
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And the algorithm is according to company priorities, not exactly. So, if I post something I cannot be sure that everybody who is watching my feed will actually get to see it. For example when the black lives matter movement happened in the US, and this is a case that Zeynep Tufekci talks in her book, there was for a long period of time, she found that the stories were not happening, she went and checked in her feed and it was not happening.

Whereas some journalist friends told her that this is something that is happening. And what she realizes is that though people were posting about it, it was not showing up on her feed, feed was talking about something else, alright.

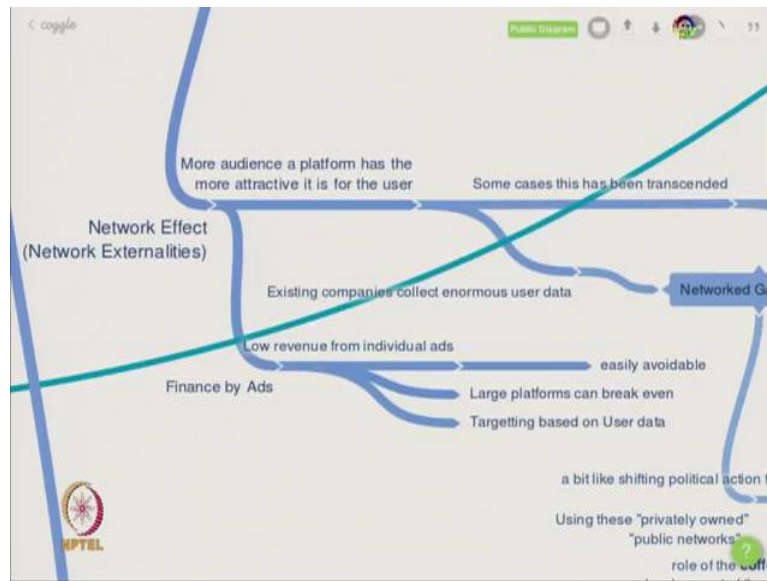
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So obviously the algorithm is playing a role to down play certain things, it could be the political bias, it could be a filter bubble, it can work. And once the story is buried because people haven't seen it, it does not gather the likes, it does not gather the shares. And therefore, it gets increasingly hidden. So there is a certain kind of a network phenomena that takes place. And the visibility of post is enhanced by the algorithm by likes, by controversy for comments, there is a discussion happening on it.

So posts which are trolled, which are attacked by trolls are the ones which are likely to be more visible because obviously there is a lot of activity, more people are visiting so the status goes up. So she says this is the way algorithms can work and operate and one needs to be slightly careful about them.

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And the final thing that she also talks about, is about the network externalities. The network effect is something that takes place because the more an audience, because sometimes there are people who try to stay away from a certain platform that I will not have a Facebook account or I will not use WhatsApp, a lot of people try to leave these platforms that they are not able to.

Because if the real action is happening on a certain platform, that platform becomes more important in fact this is a very important example. You see we looked at how Google is a very important public resource today, because they are able to provide so many platforms, so many applications which are interconnected, this provides enormous amount of utility, which other companies are not able to match. Some of the companies may actually have better technology in certain areas, but still they do not have the kind of linking with other applications. And therefore, their effectiveness gets reduced.

But one area where Google did not succeed is the social media. Google tried, Google originally had Orkut which was the most popular, in India at least, platform before Facebook took over and everybody just moved to Facebook straight away, Google tried to launch Google Plus, but it did not work. why is that because this is the network effect, the more the number of audience a particular platform has the more it is attractive for the user.

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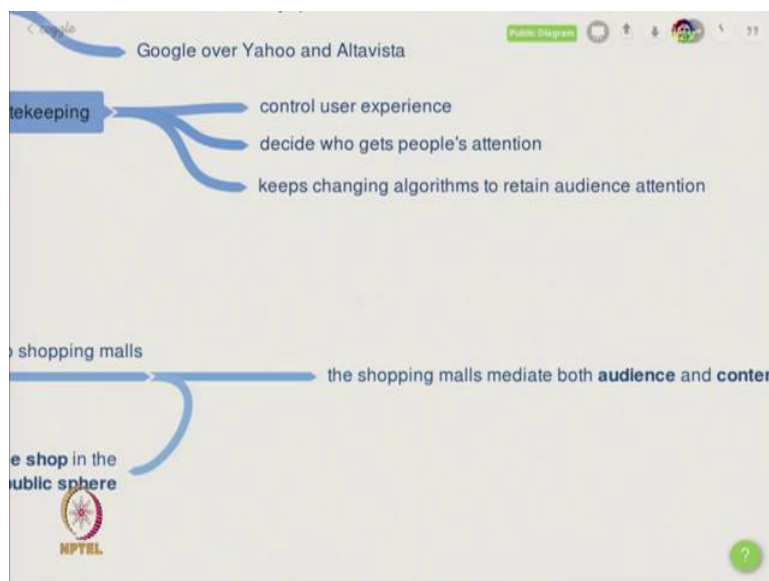
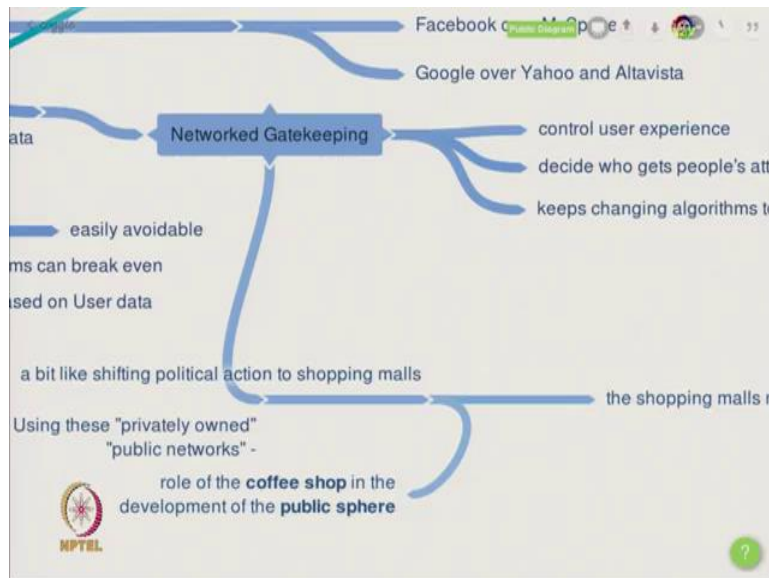
And so obviously sometimes this has been translated. Facebook manage to rule over MySpace or Google became the most important search engine over the other popular search engines of their times, Yahoo and AltaVista. And what they do, these companies, once they have the network with them is that they collect enormous amounts of user data and they are financed by ads and they get very low revenue from individual ads. So the larger platforms can break even the smaller platforms cannot break even because they target these ads based on user data so the larger base that you have more that you can earn.

So a certain ad is very cheap, and the way this adds. Traditionally if you published an ad in a newspaper or people publish an ad in television or a billboard, there is no user feedback. So

there is no way that revenue can be collected on the basis of how many people actually looked up at that billboard or how many people are watching the television that is only a estimate.

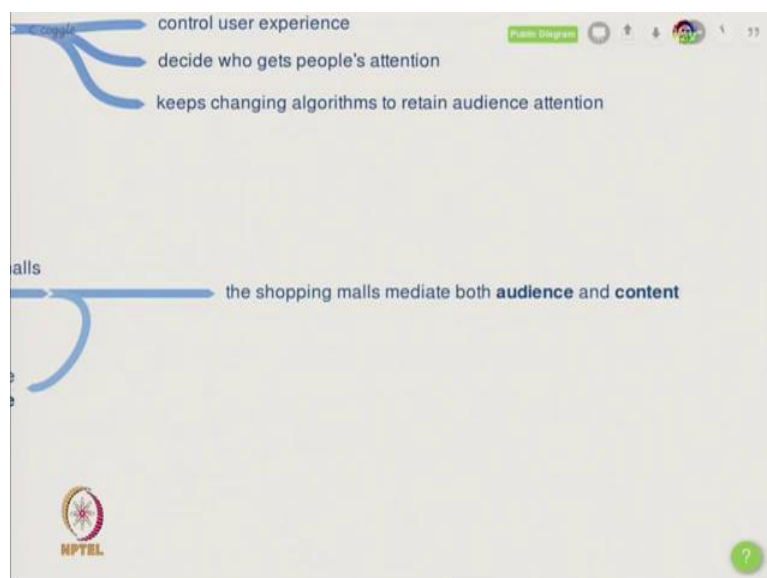
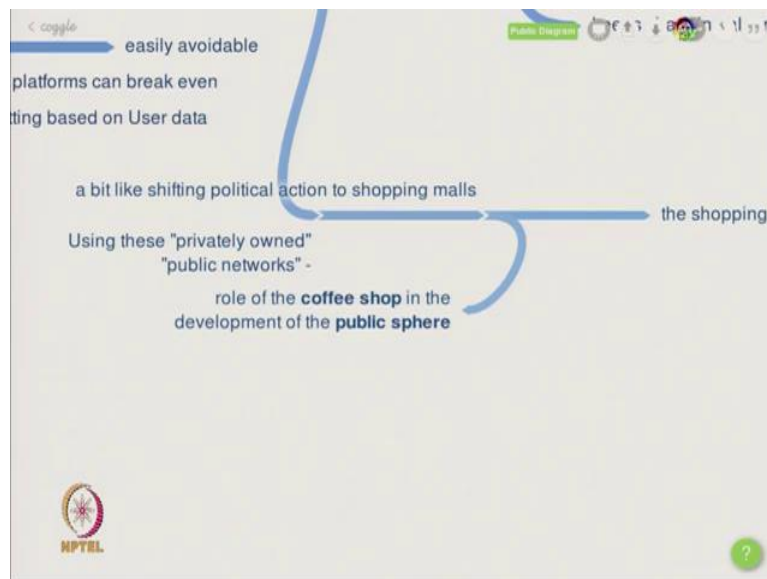
But in the case of the internet, because it can be pin pointed how many clicks a certain ad has or how many times that ad actually appears on a certain person's page in front of their eyes is something that can be located. And therefore, the price of each ad is very low and you have to pay more if you get more clicks and therefore, smaller platforms find it difficult to break even at that kind of competition.

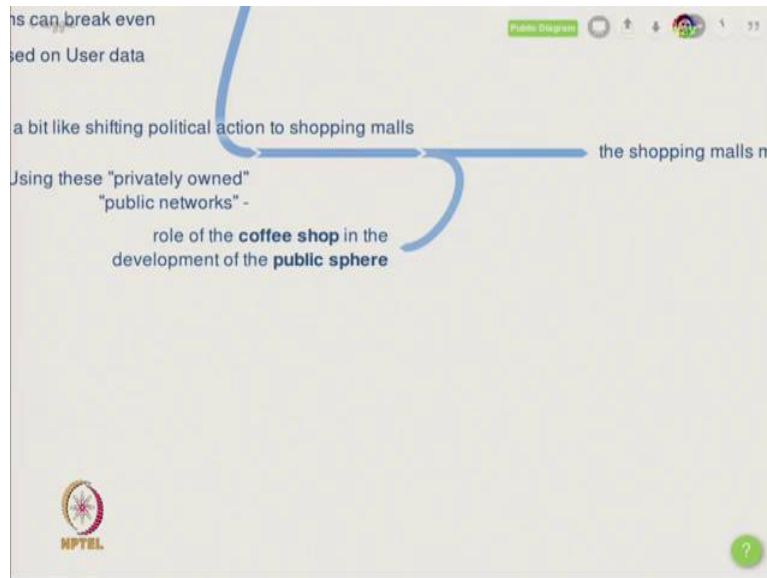
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And so this kind of data is used for gatekeeping to control user experience and decide who gets people's attention. And the fact also is that these algorithms keep changing, so each time you have to learn some new feature that is coming in. It is very difficult, so the user has to constantly adapt, the creator of the content has to constantly adapt to this kind of changing mechanism.

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And finally the point that she makes is what about political change, how about political action, what about the role of this media. She says this is a bit like shifting political action to the shopping malls. You can, if you look upon shopping malls as public space, but they are privately owned, so to the shopping mall may allow a certain kind of mobilisation, but they can also use that to censor, and that is what according to Tufekci, the social media actually does.

Of course public sphere is very important, we have also talked about the role of coffee shops, coffee houses in the development of public sphere. When capitalist democracy comes into being the rise of the parliamentary politics and the controller, the reduction of powers of the monarchy a very important role was played by public spaces like coffee shops.

But modern shopping malls play a certain different kind of role because these are privately owned in a way in which where if there is a certain kind of mobilisation on these social media platforms, the social media platform can step in and control it either through algorithms or through banning of certain pages or posts, or deletion of certain accounts or it could be done at the instance of the government. So that linkage between the owner of the media and the government is there.

But the other way that the government can control or many governments can seek to control the content on these social media platforms is through creating these large interventionary groups which would dominate the conversation on the social media by posting fake news or raising frivolous questions or trolling and various other kinds of activity. So Tufekci's essay

discusses some of the natures in which social media content can be monitored and can be influenced in the current day.

KEYWORDS:

Twitter, Facebook, Zeynep Tufecki, algorithm, social platform, corporate, Google, movements, organisation, media, Confirmation bias, click baiting, filter bubble, content creator, targeted advertisement, Nicholas Carr