Facebook and the Public Sphere

Assessing the responsibility of a dominant social media platform through the lens of the public sphere

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the relation between the public sphere as described by Jürgen Habermas and Facebook. It addresses the two main concerns for Facebook as a modern digital medium: fake news and polarisation. Subsequently, this thesis aims to answer the question of whose responsibility it is to tackle these problems. It will be argued how Facebook is the responsible party in doing this, which will be supported by the extent to which Facebook resembles a public sphere. Firstly, the public sphere as described by Habermas will be discussed. From this, the norms that define and regulate this as a public sphere will be distilled. Those will subsequently be applied to Facebook, which will show how Facebook in theory lives up to these norms, while in practice it deviates from them. It will also become clear why this inability to live up to the norms does not entail the norms should be abandoned entirely. The problems of fake news and polarisation will be discussed more in depth, and why these problems are especially troublesome in a public sphere. Lastly, after going over all potential actors with regards to their responsibility towards fixing the problems of Facebook, it will become apparent why Facebook is the only party that can and should do this.

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Introduction

As of January 2021, around 4.66 billion people worldwide have access to the internet.[1] Of those, around 2.85 billion use Facebook, making it the most used social media platform in the world.[2] As such, we can imagine the potential impact a company of that magnitude can have on society as a whole, especially as a company that prides itself on connecting people. As a private company, Facebook can create its own policies and do what it wants regarding its platform. Experience has shown that when left unchecked, this social media platform has the potential to cause both great harms and great goods. It could welcome disruptions on the platform for the sake of user engagement, such as in January 2021 leading up to and during the USA Capitol Hill riots. [3] However, Facebook can also offer its services in what could be considered more noble causes, as was the case during the Arab Spring from 2010 until 2012. During that time the youth in particular used social media platforms such as Facebook for essential means of communicating and organising when protesting against the dictators of their countries. The effect was great: research suggests new media channels such as Facebook helped snowball the demonstrations to other countries and made an information flow possible that would otherwise have been hindered by the state controlled media.[4] Especially from instances such as these, it is evident how much influence a social media company with a magnitude such as Facebook can have.

Polarisation and fake news

These are only a few of many examples that show how influential a social media platform as big as Facebook can be in the real world. It is therefore important that the information that is spread on the platform is accurate and trustworthy. This is especially important in cases where Facebook is one of the few media that can be relied on, as during the Arab Spring where state controlled media were not trustworthy.

[1] Statista, 2021, "Internet Users In The World 2021",
https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/.
[2] Statista, 2021, "Most Used Social Media 2021".
https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/
[3] James Clayton, 2021, "Frances Haugen: Facebook Whistleblower Reveals Identity", *BBC News,*
https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-58784615.
[4] Mohamed Arafa and Crystal Armstrong, 2016, ""Facebook to Mobilize, Twitter to Coordinate Protests, and YouTube to Tell the World": New Media, Cyberactivism, and the Arab Spring", *Journal of Global Initiatives,* 10(1), p. 77.

Facebook has created policy around the ordering of information and its accuracy. However, if Facebook can simply decide on the spot whether it will follow its own policies – for example, turning certain flagging algorithms on and off as it pleases as during the Capitol Hill riots[5] – then we have to wonder whether the company is acting in an appropriate, ethical fashion. One could say that as a private company Facebook is allowed to act as it wants. However, in the 21st century digital media companies such as Facebook play a bigger role in global, regional and personal communication than they have in the past.

With this new power there is a mandate for managing this platform in a manner that is appropriate for its use. This concretely means avoiding the two main problems this thesis will highlight: polarisation and fake news. As several pieces of literature suggest[6] [7] [8] [9], these are some of the main problems social media companies such as Facebook face, which can have great effects on the real world. These are also the problems most associated with the functions for which people use Facebook. A way of mitigating these problems is ensuring that the information on the platform is reliable. This is important because people use Facebook for reading up on news. Statistics show that more than half of all U.S. adults get their news at least partially from Facebook. This number includes U.S. adults who do not use Facebook at all, meaning that amongst actual Facebook users the percentage of people that use it for news goes up.[10] If then Facebook is plagued by fake news and inaccuracies, the probability of citizens forming uninformed opinions on perhaps very important topics such as elections increases. This in turn can fuel polarisation, which is exacerbated by the way the website itself functions with its algorithm use. The previous statistic also shows how even though news is often read on Facebook, the trust in that news being accurate has dropped over

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[5] Clayton, *BBC News,* https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-58784615.

[6] Márcio Moretto Ribeiro, and Pablo Ortellado, 2018, "Fake News: What it is and how to deal with it", *International Journal on Human Rights,* 15.27: pp. 69-81.

[7] Paul Bernal, 2018, "Facebook: Why Facebook makes the fake news problem inevitable", *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly,* 69: pp. 513–530.

[8] Daniel Kreiss, and Shannon C. McGregor, 2018, "Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 US presidential cycle", *Political Communication* 35.2: pp. 155-177.

[9] This is only some of the research conducted on this subject. Naturally there are many more bodies of research discussing the phenomena of fake news and polarisation.

[10] Pew Research Center, 2021, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms in 2020", https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/.

the years, showing how Facebook's perceived reliability has decreased by its lacking actions against instances of fake news. In this way, Facebook can no longer be the – sometimes essential – means of communication that it is currently used as.

Therefore, fake news and polarisation are the two main problems that will be highlighted in this thesis. In tackling these problems, the question of responsibility has to be answered: *whose responsibility is it to ensure the problems of polarisation and fake news are resolved?* When it comes to Facebook and responsibility, a means of tackling this problem has been found by taking the platform / publisher dichotomy into account.[11] The relation between the two terms has been discussed, and it has been shown that Facebook uses both terms interchangeably to fit its current purpose. In general, the company argues that due to it being a platform, it has little to no responsibilities regarding the content on it. On the other hand, if Facebook were a publisher, it can be held to similar standards that for example newspapers are held to. In this thesis, I want to surpass this dichotomy. I will argue how Facebook, even if it only were a platform, cannot be without responsibilities. However, these responsibilities are expressed differently than in the average newspaper, due to Facebook not fulfilling the definition of a platform nor the definition of a publisher completely. I will thus contribute to this literary field by showing that this platform / publisher dichotomy is not the only perspective from which the responsibilities of Facebook can be discussed.

Facebook and the public sphere

That being said, the use of the website has shifted over time. Whereas in the past Facebook was merely a way of hanging out with friends online, nowadays it is also used for catching up on news and political communication.[12] Most people would recognize this new use of Facebook as a way of facilitating debate and as a way of people sharing their political stances and opinions, that go beyond the 'intended' original purpose of just connecting with friends. In this way it can be said that Facebook resembles a public sphere. The philosophical concept of the public sphere can be seen as a social space in

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[11] Aarthi Vadde, 2021, "Platform or Publisher", *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA),* 136.3: pp. 455-462.

[12] Nic Newman et al, 2021, "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021". *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.*

which people can convene to openly recognize societal problems and have debates. The concept of the public sphere is most famously discussed by Jürgen Habermas. In his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, he identifies what constitutes a public sphere.

The activities on Facebook bear resemblance to the activities that took place in what Habermas considers the public sphere, which is something that will be dealt with more in depth in this thesis. Therefore, I will use the work of Habermas to make a parallel with Facebook. Analysing Habermas and his definition of the public sphere will allow me to distil certain norms on what a public sphere entails, which can then be applied to Facebook. The activities on Facebook and in the Habermasian public sphere are similar, making it relevant to evaluate these activities by the aforementioned norms. Using those as a jumping-off point, they will offer the basis on making the claim that Facebook is the one carrying the responsibility for ensuring a proper online space on its own platform. This concretely means it has the responsibility for tackling the two main problems of polarisation and fake news.

Structure

In order to come to this conclusion, I will take the following steps. The first question that will be answered is the question of what a public sphere entails, and if Facebook falls under that definition. For this, I will provide the view of Jürgen Habermas and describe what important characteristics he claims the (ideal) public sphere has. Here it will become evident what the norms are that determine this ideal public sphere. After providing this theoretical background, I will review Facebook by these norms. This will show how Facebook simultaneously does and does not hold itself to the Habermasian view. Thus, considering the similarity in function and intent, this is problematic as it does not fully hold itself to the norms that regulate a public sphere. For this thesis, the standards as set by Habermas will be the benchmark to which Facebook will be tested. This is not to say that the Habermasian public sphere is without faults of its own (something that will also become clear in Chapter 2). However, as one of the most influential works within the public sphere literary field and the one bearing the most resemblance to Facebook, the Habermasian public sphere will serve as the benchmark of this thesis. It will become clear how in essence the type of activities that happen on Facebook also happen in that public sphere. If then these type of activities keep

occurring on Facebook, but with an imperfect realisation as is the case now, then something must change.

After realising this imperfect execution, one could say that Facebook should simply not try to be a public sphere, if it cannot be perfectly realised anyway. The second Chapter will answer this potential response, as it will show how the public sphere was also imperfectly realised in the Habermasian vision. A continuity between the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook will be established. This will be done by analysing Habermas more in depth, for example in how the moderator of the public sphere is judged. It will show how the Habermasian public sphere was in fact not perfectly realised, similar to Facebook. By showing this, it will become evident how an imperfect realisation of an ideal does not mean the ideal itself must be abandoned altogether. Additionally, the perspective of the users of Facebook will be taken into account. It will become clear how Facebook is used as a political medium, and how that function cannot be removed from it. Secondly, this Chapter will deal with the question of what specific problems Facebook as a public sphere deals with, and why these are problems unacceptable to the public sphere Facebook claims to be. These are the main problems of polarisation and fake news.

Thus far, the previous Chapters have established a) what a public sphere is, b) how Facebook does and does not hold itself to that view, c) why it cannot abandon the standards set by the public sphere, and d) the specific problems that are tied to Facebook's inability to realise itself as such. Lastly, the third Chapter will deal with the question of whose responsibility it is to guarantee that the Habermasian norms are applied to the activities and interactions on Facebook. It will show how Facebook itself is the only viable actor that can ensure this, as both governments and individuals are unable to take up this task for reasons that will become clear in the Chapter itself. From this, I will be able to offer my conclusion that Facebook as a public sphere is the responsible actor for ensuring its space is ordered in accordance with the Habermasian norms, with a minimisation of fake news and political polarisation.

Method, definitions and scope

The method that will be used in this thesis is that of immanent critique. This entails that I will be offering an analysis of the practice of interaction on Facebook. By looking

at that and at the practices in the Habermasian public sphere, I will derive the norms constitutive of that practice from the practice itself. Thus, I will be critiquing the practice of Facebook based on the norms that it itself has set or claims to follow. Immanent critique knows a few sub forms. The form I will be using is the practice-based model of immanent critique, which is described by Titus Stahl:

> A practice-based form of critique assumes that social practices can include normative elements, such as implicit rules, conventions or relations of authority or commitment, which a critic can refer to in order to justify demands for the change of both the actual practice and the explicitly accepted norms of the community.[13]

This model assumes that there are inherent norms that can be judged, even if those norms go beyond the understanding of its participants. This is fitting for the purpose of my thesis, where I will evaluate Facebook as well as Habermas from its practices as well as the perspective of the user in order to distil norms from that practice. I will argue for a continuity between the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook. Facebook will be held to standards that have been set by the Habermasian public sphere, and following this way of arguing will allow me to do this without the argument being arbitrary.

Additionally, quantitative research will be employed throughout this thesis, such as when analysing Facebook by its own company guidelines. I will also be carrying out a secondary data analysis, as I am using several statistics collected by other parties throughout this thesis and deriving argumentation from those statistics. However, a qualitative research analysis will be used in section 2.1.1, where I will be analysing historical and literary content from the time of the philosophical salons to compliment the empirical research from the sections before that.

Asides from method, there are a few definitions that need to be established before moving on. Firstly, this thesis will discuss fake news at several points, especially later in the thesis. It is therefore important to establish the definition I will be using. I will

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[13] Titus Stahl, 2013, "Habermas and the Project of Immanent Critique", *Constellations, an International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 20, no. 4: p. 535.

use the definition of fake news provided by the Cambridge Dictionary: "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke".[14] In this thesis I will focus on fake news created to influence political views, instead of that created as a joke. This will thus exclude satire pages where the obvious purpose is to mock current events, instead of passing off as actual news. The definition of fake news also implies a certain awareness and deliberation in the creation and spreading of falsehoods. It goes beyond, for example, opinion pieces that offer subjective interpretations on certain events, where the events themselves are presented without falsehoods. This will be kept in mind while discussing this phenomenon. While I take 'fake news' to be spread or created with awareness and deliberation in one's actions, I take 'misinformation' as meaning misinformed or misinforming without a necessarily deliberative intent. Misinformation can be spread accidentally, where the author or spreader is not necessarily aware of the inaccuracy of their statements. In this sense, fake news always falls under the broader notion of misinformation, whereas misinformation is not always fake news.

An additional important note is that this thesis will not make any claims regarding *political* obligations from Facebook. It will only consider *ethical* obligations. Policy- and law-making lie beyond the scope of this thesis. The last side note I will make is that I will only be discussing the company Facebook, and not its mother company Meta which also owns various other social media companies such as Instagram and WhatsApp. This is naturally so, as to limit my research to a single entity instead of various other social media platforms, all of which operate in a distinctly different manner.

Chapter 1

The first task in answering my research question lies in distilling the norms that regulate a public sphere. This will be done by analysing one of the most influential works in the public sphere literary field: *The Structural Transformation of the Public*

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[14] *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, 2022, "Fake news", Cambridge University Press, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news.

Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, by Jürgen Habermas. Firstly, the theoretical background of his work will be discussed. This will lead to a distillation of three norms that regulate Habermas's vision of a public sphere. The next half of this Chapter will apply these norms to Facebook, where it will be evident how it both aligns and breaks with the Habermasian conception of the public sphere.

1.1 The Habermasian public sphere

In his book, Habermas starts his explanation of the public sphere in Western societies by historically tracing it. Firstly, he notes that the notions of 'private' and 'public' go as far back as ancient Greece, where in the fully developed city-states there was a distinction between the *polis*, where political life to place, and the *oikos*, which was the place of the home. This public sphere was seen as "a realm of freedom and permanence."[15]

1.1.1 The origins of the public sphere

While this model of the public sphere was seen as important since the Renaissance, Habermas describes the foundations of this sphere – based on both the Greek model and the Roman laws – to be decomposing. Before there was such a public sphere Habermas describes in his works, he observes that there was a 'representative publicity' which existed from the Middle Ages up until the eighteenth century. In this time, kings were all-powerful in most Western countries, meaning that there was no public sphere independent of state autonomy. Thus, there was only the king and his observers and there was no distinction between the public and the private.[16] This dynamic changed in the eighteenth century with the start of the Enlightenment. Economic developments jumpstarted this change, as trade made it necessary for people to share knowledge of other places and thus engage in the "traffic of commodities and news"[17]. Because the king was no longer needed as the controller of economics, a public sphere emerged separate from state autonomy. Additionally, the state autonomy was challenged by the emergence of rational-critical debate, which occurred in the bourgeois reading public such as in the philosophical salons and coffee

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[15] Jürgen Habermas, 1989, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger, Cambridge: Polity Press: p. 4.
[16] Ibid., p. 7.
[17] Ibid., p. 15.

houses. In these spaces there was an equality where only the power of rational argument counted. Due to its association with the middle class rather than the lower working class or the noblemen, Habermas calls this the bourgeois public sphere.

The bourgeois public sphere could be found between two other realms: the Private Realm, which housed civil society and a family's internal space, and the Sphere of Public Authority, to which the court and the state belonged. In between, there were two kinds of public spheres: the public sphere in the political realm, and the public sphere in the world of letters.[18]

1.1.2 The public sphere in practice

The French philosophical salons illustrate the public sphere Habermas envisions. In these salons all participants met on equal footing. This did not mean every participant had equal status. It rather meant that status was disregarded completely. This could be seen as peculiar, as both counts and princes as well as "sons of watchmakers"[19] could engage in intellectual discourse as equals, which is something that outside of the salons would not be obvious. Here, "'opinion' became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence."[20] Important to note is that this equality was founded not necessarily on the political equality of the participants, but was based on each member's exclusiveness in relation to the political realm. This equality therefore meant an equality outside of the state's influence, as Habermas considers this disconnection from the state as something crucial in his conceptualisation of the public sphere.[21] This simultaneously explains why these salons were ran behind closed doors: they were for now to remain in secrecy as to not threaten the state power. The salons were often run by women, who played a significant part, as they could select guests, serve as moderators and determine the subject matter. The role of the moderator will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 2.

As equals, the participants in the philosophical salons discussed topics regarding 'common concern' on topics that had thus far not been questioned by the state

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[18] Ibid., p. 30.
[19] Ibid., p. 33.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 24, 35, 127.

authority. In these discussions social standing did not matter. Instead, only the power of the better argument could sway the discussion. The discussions on works of literature, art, politics and philosophy meant that these works turned into a central cultural product of these salons. These 'cultural commodities' became generally accessible, as opposed to the state having a monopoly over these.[22]

Interestingly, Habermas describes a central aspect of this new culture to be the inclusiveness and general accessibility to these cultural commodities, where all members had to be able to participate in the discussions. However, in the same breath he mentions two key conditions to having access to this: being propertied and being educated.[23] If one owned no property or were not educated (mainly traits possessed by wealthy, non-immigrant men), one had no access to these commodities and to the new public sphere. Habermas discusses this later, where he acknowledges the lack of widespread and basic education for the majority of the population. With their first needs barely being met, it naturally made sense that they did not have the funds to participate in philosophical discussions and trade in the market of cultural goods. On the other side of this spectrum was the court, who Habermas describes as not being a reading public. Therefore, there was a lack of cultural discussion as the few commissioned works were hardly being read by an interested public.[24] This means the public sphere as Habermas delineates it was meant for and created by the bourgeoisie.

1.1.3 The collapse of the public sphere
Over time, capitalism became more organized, and a shift in economic power dynamics took place. The initially horizontal relations of power turned vertical with the rise of free competition. According to the liberal model, free markets should not have created unjust power imbalances when trade was only expected to happen in horizontal power relations.[25] However, imperfect market conditions made for the (social) power to fall in privatised hands, thus eventually calling the need for a strong state: "state interventions, [...], were guided by the interest of maintaining the equilibrium of the

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[22] Ibid., p. 36.
[23] Ibid., p. 37.
[24] Ibid., p. 38.
[25] Ibid., p. 144.

system which could no longer be secured by way of the free market."[26] This in turn weakened the barrier between the public sphere and the state.

Additionally, as time went on the literary scene kept expanding, and public libraries and journals were founded. This made the reading of novels more widespread. It marked the beginning of the public sphere of letters moving out of the salons, and into the medium of the press.[27] In the time period following the culmination of liberalism, where capitalism slowly became more systematized, the relation between the private and the public that Habermas discusses disintegrated. In fact, "the contours of the bourgeois public sphere eroded."[28] This is where he marks the ending of the public sphere that he envisioned: as the public sphere expanded into more areas of society, according to Habermas it lost its critical publicity, which was its primary function. Habermas claims that over time the public sphere in the world of letters slowly collapsed:

> When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.[29]

Culture debate made way for culture consumption. An important factor in this decline is the introduction of mass media, as the following section will explain.

1.1.4 Mass media

The bourgeois public sphere depended on its individuals being well-educated and the power of the rational argument between its participants. Habermas sees the mass media as a great contributor to the erosion of this public sphere, where he deems the mass media to be "a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public [that] was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity."[30] He claims that

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[26] Ibid., p. 144 and p. 146.
[27] Ibid., p. 51.
[28] Ibid., p. 140.
[29] Ibid., p. 161.
[30] Ibid., p. 162.

this culture consuming public engaged in activities, such as merely watching TV, that warranted no further discussion. Rational critical debate was no longer present. Where in the past the trade in cultural commodities is exactly what gave way for rational critical debate about those commodities, the new way of operating eliminated the debate and instead commercialized it. Discussion was now a business with the goal being profit, instead of the discussion itself.[31]

1.1.5 Characteristics of a Habermasian public sphere

Taking all of the above into consideration, several main characteristics of a Habermasian public sphere can be distinguished. Firstly, the participants in the public sphere met on equal footing where only the power of the rational argument counted. Power relationships should be horizontal, and not vertical. This is an aspect Habermas emphasizes at multiple points in his book and was one of the main promises of his public sphere. Power relationships had to be sufficiently neutralised for the power of the rational argument to prevail.

Secondly, the public sphere is free from state authority. This is how the public sphere historically developed and was able to develop, "in conjunction with a society separated from the state."[32]

A third characteristic can be deduced by Habermas's claims on the downfall of the public sphere. At the point that capitalism was systematized, profits were deemed more important than the rational argument. Therefore, in the ideal public sphere Habermas sketches the end goal is the discussion, and not the profits that could potentially follow from facilitating and broadcasting that discussion. An important disclaimer here is that profit on its own is not constitutive of the downfall of the public sphere. In the Habermasian public sphere people also gathered to discuss trade prospects, meaning profit was never truly detached from the public sphere. The important shift is that the profit motive eventually was deemed as *more* important than the motive of having rational critical debate. It is when systematized capitalism and the profit motive penetrated and took over the other motives where the downfall of the Habermasian public sphere truly took place.

All of these characteristics will return in the following section when analysing Facebook.

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[31] Ibid., p. 164.
[32] Ibid., p. 127.

1.2 Facebook as a Habermasian public sphere

Thus far the immanent norms of what constitute a public sphere have been established. Next is the application to Facebook. Due to the similarity in activities taking place on Facebook and in the Habermasian public sphere, testing Facebook to these norms will show whether anything needs to change anything in the management of the platform. If Facebook acts like a public sphere in terms of activities and strives to be one in its own guidelines, then the platform should be regulated accordingly.

This section will show how Facebook views itself as representing several characteristics of the Habermasian public sphere. The characteristics of a Habermasian public sphere mentioned in the previous section will be analysed: equal footing between participants, the power of the rational argument, the separation from state authority, and the limited importance of profit. The first two characteristics were combined in the Habermasian public sphere. However, in this analysis they are separated due to each part having a different representation in Facebook. Thus, the now four aspects will all be analysed individually. I will show how Facebook claims to represent each characteristic in its community guidelines and will subsequently establish how reality differs from this ideal. This is problematic as it does not fully hold itself to the norms that regulate a public sphere. In this Chapter, the perspective of Facebook will be the main perspective. In Chapter 2, the perspective from the users of Facebook will be taken into account to show why the Habermasian norms cannot be abandoned.

1.2.1 Equal footing between all participants

First off, as is the case in a Habermasian public sphere, users on Facebook are assumed to be equal. Accounts are not above or below one another and there are only horizontal power relations, as opposed to vertical ones. This is an aspect that Facebook cares about to the extent that it is explicitly mentioned in its community guidelines.[33] Facebook hereby adopts the Habermasian ideal, where for example a 'lowly watchmaker' can have equal footing and equal respect while interacting with influential politicians on a level playing field.

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[33] Facebook Transparency Center, 2021, "The Facebook Community Standards apply the same to everyone, everywhere", *Policies: How Facebook improves*, https://transparency.fb.com/policies/improving/policies-apply-to-everyone-everywhere/.

However, in reality this take might be too naïve, as status can play a part both off- and online. Online, Facebook has several features that make distinctions between accounts, and thus the people behind them. First off, Facebook has both the option to 'befriend' someone, and 'follow' someone. An account – and therefore the person behind the account – that has more friends and followers than others automatically has a further reach and further influence than someone who has little of both. After all, their activity on the platform will automatically be seen by more people. In fact, the algorithm of Facebook makes it so that the more popular an account is, the more it will be recommended in other users' timeline (front page). Therefore, being a large and popular account will lead the account to become even larger and more popular, leading to discrepancies in reach between accounts. Sociological literature also suggests that the more popular an individual is, the more charismatic authority this person can have, which in turn might lead to a larger and more popular account to gain more credibility than its smaller counterpart.[34] This relation will become asymmetrical: a large account can post something that thousands of others will see (and believe), whereas a small account may not even reach a few dozen people. This is opposed to real-life communication where both parties of a conversation will (in principle) have equal reach in the conversation: in a group of ten people each person will be heard by nine other individuals, something that differs when posting on Facebook.

Secondly, Facebook has several features that allow certain accounts to be boosted in favour of others. In fact, this feature is explained and promoted on its own website, meaning it is well-aware and actively encourage this behaviour. The company even offers a step-by-step plan on how to achieve this.[35] From a business standpoint this makes sense, as Facebook needs to earn money one way or another – considering Facebook is free for its users. In fact, boosted posts such as ads are the company's main source of revenue.[36] However, this practice goes directly against the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere, where all participants are equal *despite* their status instead of

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[34] Max Weber, Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich, 1978, "Charismatic Authority and Charismatic Community", *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology,* Vol. 1. University of California Press: pp. 241-246.

[35] Facebook for Business, 2021, *Een bericht promoten op Facebook,* https://www.facebook.com/business/help/347839548598012?id=352109282177656.

[36] Matthew Johnston, 2021, "How Facebook (Meta) Makes Money", *Investopedia,* https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/120114/how-does-facebook-fb-make-money.asp.

unequal *because of* their status, as is the case with Facebook. Paid posts also directly go against the equality principle that Habermas stands for, because he considers the equality of the participants to be dependent on their release from economic stimulus.

All in all, Facebook is a platform on which it assumes that all its participants are equal, as is explicitly stated in the company statements. Although on paper this coincides with the Habermasian take, practice proves that this equality does not hold up. Status differences translate to the online realm, and combined with the other unequal policies Facebook employs it becomes evident how in practice Facebook does not uphold itself to the Habermasian norm it sets for itself.

1.2.2 The power of the rational argument

Next is the power of the rational argument. This is an aspect of the Habermasian public sphere that is closely related to the former aspect of equality among participants. In fact, it is because of that equality and the supposed lack of influence from outside factors such as status, that the only relevant power is the power of argumentation. However, as mentioned earlier these two aspects will be discussed separately, as they are represented differently in Facebook than in their Habermasian counterpart.

Facebook does not moderate its platform a lot, which gives the impression that the company does not deem it necessary. It often does not intervene with what its users post and optionally want to promote, because it believes it to be harming the freedom of speech.[37] [38] This is of course a broad notion. In the United States, the following factors are *lesser* to *not* protected under the First Amendment: intentionally distressing content, obscenity, soliciting crime, child pornography, and more which all falls under the broader notion of "speech integral to criminal conduct".[39] The fact that Facebook wishes to not intervene with its users' activities on the platform assumes that the content on the platform does not fall under any of the exceptions listed in the right to free speech. It also assumes that the posted content is not in strive with the

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[37] Andrew Marantz, 2019, "Facebook And The "Free Speech" Excuse", *The New Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/facebook-and-the-free-speech-excuse.

[38] Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli, 2020, "The battle to end fake news: A qualitative content analysis of Facebook announcements on how it combats disinformation", *International Communication Gazette,* 82(1): p 64.

[39] Eugene Volokh, 2015, "The speech integral to criminal conduct exception", *Cornell Law Review,* 101: p. 983.

company's own community guidelines. This infers that the right to free speech is used solely for harmless discussions in which each participant is respectful. This is supported by the fact that Facebook assumes in its community standards that all users will be decent and considerate with one another: "We expect that people will respect the dignity of others and not harass or degrade others."[40] Although Facebook might just believe their platform is for sharing funny content, for example, it does show a certain view that it has on its users as responsible actors who take care in their words.

Another factor that shows the way Facebook cares about the quality of its contents – and therefore the users engaging with that content – can be seen in what Facebook chooses to show its users. More particularly, by analysing what Facebook does *not* show its users, a stance on the desired quality of the content on the site can be delineated. For example, Facebook aims not to boost any posts that contain "[l]ow-quality, objectionable, [...], [m]isleading, sensational, and/or spammy content"[41]. Not boosting this type of content shows a dedication towards content that is respectful, true, and high-quality, preferring the rational over the sensational. With those aims in regards to boosted posts, it can be argued how Facebook views its users accordingly by only wishing to show content that matches the attitude and wishes of that user. Accordingly, Facebook users use the website as a way of reading news and discussing about that news. As in the Habermasian public sphere, Facebook is then used as a platform for rational discussion. Facebook has always employed a business strategy of catering to the wishes of its users.[42] If then Facebook's users have indicated to use the website as a means for politics and rational discussion, Facebook will facilitate that, as its business strategy consists of realising the functions the users want out of the platform. Thus, if Facebook users use the platform as a means of rational discussion, Facebook will facilitate this, transferring the priority of rational discussion onto the company itself. The reasons why Facebook users can reasonably expect the platform to facilitate this function will be described in depth in section 2.1.2.

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[40] Facebook Transparency Center, 2021, *Policies: Facebook Community Standards*, https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/.

[41] Facebook for Business, 2022, *Suggested Posts on Facebook Feed*, https://www.facebook.com/business/help/1082519118875784.

[42] Josh Obear, 2018, "Move Last and Take Things: Facebook and Predatory Copying", *Columbia Business Law Review, vol. 3*: p. 1025.

While all this could show how Facebook sees its platform as a space for rational discussion, examples from practice shows how this is certainly not always the case. In particular, the way Facebook has used its own platform in the past and present shows something on how it views its own platform as something other than merely a space for rational discussion. During the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Facebook has explicitly sided with the Ukrainian people. On top of that, Facebook has made a rather exceptional and outspoken break from its own community guidelines: users in selected Eastern European countries were now allowed to make posts containing hate speech and even outward threats towards Russian aggressors.[43] What such an act shows is that Facebook is almost weaponizing its own platform. It undermines the idea that it is merely a space for rational discussion. It also undermines the idea that users on Facebook will merely be rational agents, as they are in this instance even encouraged to post hate speech and threats, which can be argued is not the language used by solely rational agents with the purpose of holding informative discussions.

Additionally, the way Facebook's algorithms function is by prioritising sentiment over argument, as it has learned this will lead to more user engagement.[44] As Chapter 2 will show more in depth, not every Facebook user sees the same type of content on their front page. People start from different information positions when engaging in discussions. This fact shows how rational discussion is undermined in practice, as it is difficult to facilitate debate when the participants do not have the same set of information.

Thus, Habermas assumes the power of the rational argument will prevail due to its participants being equal. On the other hand, Facebook does not express a strong sense of equality as the basis on why its users will be respectful and dignified towards one another. What they both have in common is that one way or another, they prioritise rationality and assume the participants in their spheres to be rational agents. However, practice again shows that Facebook views its platform as not merely a space for facilitating rational discourse, hardly adhering to its own standards in actual fact.

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[43] Munsif Vengattil and Elizabeth Culliford, 2022, "Facebook Allows War Posts Urging Violence Against Russian Invaders", *Reuters,* https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-facebook-instagram-temporarily-allow-calls-violence-against-russians-2022-03-10/.
[44] Ted Brader, 2005, "Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions." *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2: p. 388.

1.2.3 Separation from state authority

Another main element of the Habermasian public sphere is the separation the public sphere has from the state authority. This is something that can be seen in Facebook as well, as a private company having a monopoly position on its market. Additionally, Facebook is a global company spanning over a lot countries, meaning it has to deal with different state regulations in each country.

The first parallel between the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook can be seen in the fact that Facebook frames itself as a platform for all ideas.[45] As long as it conforms to the community guidelines, any thought or idea can be shared and discussed. This can be seen in the Habermasian public sphere as well, which started off with discussing certain topics that were not discussed before by the state authority. Although Facebook does not usually contrast itself to the state authority in the way the Habermasian public sphere does, there are some exceptions, with the Arab Spring protests mentioned in the Introduction being the most notable one. This was a clear case of Facebook siding against a state authority and instead helping the protestors who were against the regimes of their countries. In this instance it can be said that Facebook even actively contributed to the success of these protests by providing the necessary means of communication when the state controlled media could not be trusted.[46] Another notable instance is the aforementioned Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Facebook allowed hate speech and threats towards Russian aggressors coming from users in selected Eastern European countries. Such an explicit break – even if only limited and temporary – from its community guidelines is telling and shows a direct opposition to a state authority.

That being said, instances in which Facebook takes such an explicit stance for or against a country are rare. The pushback against or contrast to a state authority is not inherently there in Facebook as it is in the Habermasian public sphere. Nevertheless, the parallel is still there as both are spaces in which discussion on any topic is encouraged. Therefore, Facebook wishes to uphold the right to make their own policy. While this could be partly – if not mostly – motivated by economic incentives, a part

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[45] Mark Zuckerberg, 2017, "I want to respond to President Trump's tweet…" Facebook, September 27, 2017, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10104067130714241&id=4.

[46] Arafa and Armstrong, *Journal of Global Initiatives,* p. 77.

of it has to do with the spirit Facebook wishes to propagate of a free space in which all can be discussed with no fear of repercussions.[47] The Habermasian framework can be seen in this viewpoint, as that public sphere also distinguishes itself as a place in which all can be said – especially if this was not allowed by the state authority. In addition, it is relevant for the Habermasian public sphere that the public sphere can critique itself in relative safety. This is something present in Facebook as well: it is certainly possible for users to be critical of Facebook on Facebook itself. Due to the separation of institutions, Facebook gains the ability to open a space for free discussion and put matters of common concern on the agenda, as was the case in the Habermasian public sphere.

The Habermasian public sphere characterizes itself as separate from the state, and its members had to have a certain exclusiveness in relation to the political realm. This was necessary as to not threaten the state power. Curiously, with the sphere of Facebook almost the opposite effect has taken place: political activity is encouraged – especially if it boosts user engagement. Additionally, one could go as far as to say that Facebook holds more (political) power than some nations themselves do, as is reflected in the amount of users, the amount of revenue and the amount of real world effect (such as the Arab Spring). In that way, the roles have been reversed: it is not the public sphere that has to fear the state authority, but the state authority that has to fear the public sphere. Although it is not demanded of Facebook's users to be disconnected from the political realm as it is in the Habermasian public sphere, Facebook does not seem to share that sentiment for itself: in general it actively tries to avoid being tied to any political movement or 'side'.[48] Here the view of the neutral manager of the public sphere can be seen: an entity not meddling in the discussion and only providing the platform, not actively engaging in it. This is similar to the salons: there were discussion leaders providing the space for a debate, however, Habermas never gave any indication that those were active participants.

Thus, the Habermasian take that Facebook carries out can be seen throughout the platform: Facebook wishes to be seen as a neutral manager with no political ties, who

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[47] Facebook Transparency Center, 2021, *Policies: Facebook Community Standards.*
[48] Alexis Madrigal, 2017, "The False Dream Of A Neutral Facebook", *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/09/the-false-dream-of-a-neutral-facebook/541404/.

is separate from the state. For a public sphere it is crucial that it does not become a tool for the state to organise power. While state propaganda can indirectly be spread on social media such as Facebook by ways of fake news and by buying ads, generally speaking Facebook is not a means for a state to organise power and it can take a definitive stance against this when it wishes to. For example, Facebook can ban certain state media that operate through Facebook or discontinue any ad deals. However, the fact that it is possible for states to propagate and carry out influence through Facebook does show a break with the Habermasian public sphere, where true separation from the state authority was a necessity to facilitate open discussion. Therefore, while Facebook mostly does adhere to the Habermasian characteristic of separation from state authority, it does not do this fully as long as the possibility for state influence is still there. It has additionally acted for or against certain state authorities both in the past and present, which automatically means it is not entirely a separate entity from state authority. Therefore, Facebook is in practice not truly separated from state authority the way the Habermasian public sphere was.

1.2.4 The limited importance of profit

The last characteristic of the Habermasian public sphere that I will consider is the limited importance of profit in rational discussion. As Habermas describes the decline of the public sphere, a key factor he mentions is that discussion is no longer held for the purpose of intellectual discourse. Instead: the only discussion that is held, is held in the light of making a profit, which he claims to be tainting the discussion itself because the profit motive wins over the motive of rational discourse. Therefore, this is an important characteristic to analyse in light of Facebook, especially as a company that propagates itself as an open space in which discussion can be held freely. The most important element to look for in what Facebook stands for is any indication that they value discussion on its own, and not solely for the pursuing of profit.

It has long been the question what Facebook exactly is, or, more specifically, what it considers itself to be. In particular, the question has been raised whether Facebook is a publisher or merely a platform. In the past Mark Zuckerberg – founder and CEO of Facebook – has always insisted Facebook is a platform.[49] The reason this distinction

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[49] Andrew Marantz, 2019, "Facebook And The "Free Speech" Excuse", *The New Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/facebook-and-the-free-speech-excuse.

matters, is because if Facebook admits to being a publisher instead of a platform, it has more responsibilities and obligations to regulate their space and the content in it. Claiming to be a platform is both legally and morally easier, as that would mean the space of Facebook is "nothing but pure, empty space."[50] The functional difference between a platform and a publisher is that publishers make editorial decisions. They decide what to publish – and what not to publish – and are in general rigorous fact-checkers. On the other hand, a platform in essence is a means of sharing and transferring information, and promote open conversation. In general platforms do not ban people and do not flag inaccurate information such as fake news. In this sense, platforms truly are in their essence empty of their own ideology or philosophy.

Although the stance that Facebook is merely a platform might simply be held due to convenience, it does say something about the way discussion held on the platform is viewed. If Facebook truly views itself as merely a platform in which discussion is held freely, then in essence there is no profit attached to the notion of discussion. If it claims to be a platform, and *not* a publisher, this assumes that it is a) not responsible for the content posted on its site, and b) not motivated by the profit that follows from that content. After all, if they were motivated by profit, then it would matter what its users would post, which is not suggested by the distanced stance the company takes when reviewing their own role.

However, having said that, practice shows that Facebook certainly cares about what its users post on the platform. This is evident even by its own company guidelines, which state Facebook will intervene if content does not follow the community guidelines. The fact that Facebook will intervene – even if only slightly – already discredits the view of the distanced manager of the platform, and suggests Facebook is certainly not merely a platform. Moreover, Facebook has recently launched a specific News Tab.[51] This new section on Facebook contains several types of news collected by journalists. It is supposed to contain high-quality sources and is supposed to provide the user with both personally relevant as well as trustworthy sources of news. What the addition of this news tab also makes clear is that it is an implicit admission from Facebook to being a

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Facebook for Business, 2021, *About Facebook News,*
https://www.facebook.com/business/help/417376132287321?id=204021664031159.

publisher, and not merely a platform. What it shows is that Facebook shares qualities with both publishers and platforms.

An (implicit) admission of being akin to a publisher, and not merely a platform, does not automatically mean that the discussion held on Facebook is only facilitated because it is geared towards profit. After all, Facebook as a publisher can still collect and organise its news according to trustworthiness, relevance and other factors besides profit. In fact, this is what Facebook itself claims: the reason Facebook News was launched was to provide high-quality, relevant, informative and accurate news. This suggests that offering this information is solely for the sake of providing proper information for its users, and never mentions anything regarding profit. This suggests a parallel to the Habermasian public sphere, where the discussion was valued for the discussion, and not for the profits that could follow from it. To be clear, it is not necessarily a problem if the profit motive is still attached to discussion. After all, publishers need to earn money in order to keep their companies afloat. However, when objectivity – or more specifically: trustworthiness – is in question, this can cause problems. In the Habermasian public sphere the profit motive was present alongside the motive for rational discussion. Habermas describes the downfall of the public sphere when this profit motive wins out over the other motives. The reason objectivity and trustworthiness matters is that when these are absent, the difference between news and ads/fake news can no longer easily be made. If users on Facebook are no longer able to differentiate between real news and ads disguised as news, then it is no longer possible for them to form their own rational opinions. This is a true example of the profit motive winning over the others, which is something highly undesirable to Habermas's standards: the discussion has to be shielded from the profit motive to an adequate extent.

Turning again to Facebook News, the News Tab has in practice already raised some questions regarding objectivity and trustworthiness. In particular, Breitbart News, a news source commonly recognized as being both biased and a spreader of fake news[52], was added to the News Tab while the controversy regarding the news source was known

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[52] Lauren Lutzke, Caitlin Drummond, Paul Slovic, and Joseph Árvai, 2019, "Priming critical thinking: Simple interventions limit the influence of fake news about climate change on Facebook", *Global Environmental Change*: vol. 58.

to the company. This decision by Facebook shows how it is willing to make business decisions for the sake of profit, instead of the sake of objectivity.[53] Here it is visible how the profit motive wins out over the motive of rational discussion. Additionally, as is well known by now, Facebook makes most of its money with ad revenue. In the same spirit, the more user engagement there is, the more ad revenue can be obtained. Therefore, Facebook wishes to have as much user engagement as possible, which can most easily be done by facilitating content that raises (negative) emotions in users. Due to people reacting stronger when such emotions are involved, it makes sense for a platform relying on reactivity to facilitate content that provokes these feelings.[54]

As can be seen in this last characteristic of a Habermasian public sphere, it is evident from its own policies and statements how Facebook views its own role. Facebook seems to hold a position on a limited-profit view on discussion, as is in accordance with the Habermasian public sphere. However, again practice has shown that this view is unsustainable and far from reality, as the company has made several decisions that go against this view.

1.2.5 Chapter conclusion – Facebook in (dis)agreement with the Habermasian view
In conclusion, from all of the above it is apparent that Facebook considers itself to be upholding the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere. It considers all its users in essence as equals, promotes the desire for rational discourse, wishes to be separate from state authority, and claims to find profit of limited importance in regards to discussion. However, it has also become clear how this view does not hold up in practice on all four of these points. While Facebook may see itself as some sort of modern version of the philosophical salon Habermas describes, reality shows how in practice this is not truly the case. In reality, managing and operating in the digital sphere is much more far-reaching and problematic than how Facebook sees it itself. The previous sections have shown that Facebook is in its ideal akin to a public sphere. What the previous sections have also shown is that Facebook bears similarities to both platforms and publishers, having a stance in between as a sort of 'platform+'. This adds to the publisher / platform dichotomy that is often considered when talking about the responsibilities of Facebook. However, the fact that Facebook both on paper and in

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[53] Marantz, 2019, "The "Free Speech" Excuse", *The New Yorker*.
[54] Brader, *American Journal of Political Science,* pp. 388–405.

practice falls somewhere in between does not mean that Facebook is thus absolved from any responsibilities. Even if we were to consider Facebook as more akin to a platform than a publisher, this does not shield it from criticism or responsibilities, as the rest of this thesis will show.

This Chapter began with distilling the norms and characteristics that are central to the Habermasian public sphere. Due to the activities on Facebook and the activities in the Habermasian public sphere being similar, these norms have been tested against Facebook's own policy and practices. This has shown how in theory Facebook considers itself at possessing these characteristics, while in practice it does not. This is problematic, as Facebook does not hold itself to the norms that regulate the activities that happen in the public sphere.

Following all this, it could be tempting to say that if Facebook cannot realise the public sphere it wishes to be, then it should just stop trying altogether. After all, why chase after an ideal you cannot realise? The company could just lower the figurative bar in regards to its guidelines. However, the next Chapter will show the two reasons why this solution is not feasible.

After showing how Facebook cannot deny its own function as a public sphere by both taking the Habermasian public sphere and the perspective of the user into account, the second Chapter will delve deeper into the main problems this thesis will discuss: polarisation and fake news. Following this, the third Chapter will subsequently deal with the question on whose responsibility it is to solve or mitigate these problems.

Chapter 2

The previous Chapter described the Habermasian public sphere, and how Facebook simultaneously does and does not hold itself according to that view. The pessimistic reader could therefore say that Facebook should stop chasing the Habermasian ideals it adheres to in its community guidelines, and should instead lower the standard of those guidelines. However, the first half of this Chapter will show why this is not feasible. It will show more in depth how there is a continuity from the Habermasian

public sphere to Facebook, which can provide the basis for eventually distilling responsibilities for Facebook in Chapter 3. In addition, the way Facebook is used as a public sphere nowadays means it cannot simply drop its ideals and claim to not be political. There is a responsibility towards Facebook's users to keep pursuing the ideals in practice that it ascribes to on paper. From that, the second part of this Chapter will delineate the two main problems of Facebook that are chosen for this thesis: belief polarisation and fake news.

2.1. Facebook cannot abandon its own standards

In this section it will be described why Facebook, as an imperfect realisation of a public sphere, cannot simply abandon the standards of the public sphere altogether. This will firstly be done by analysing a continuity between the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook more in depth. As established in the previous Chapter, Facebook fails on several fronts to adhere to the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere. However, in that failure in execution there is a dynamic visible in the internet era that is not inherently different from the non-internet era that preceded it. This dynamic shows an imperfect execution in both the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook, where both spheres still hold the same ideal in mind. The main ideal I will be tracing is the ideal of equality, and the way status affects the execution of that ideal in practice in both the Habermasian and digital public sphere. This continuity will provide the basis for why the Habermasian norms can be applied to Facebook, and also shows how Facebook cannot simply abandon its own standards. This section will make use of a qualitative research method, where I will draw from historical and literary sources to provide my analysis.

After establishing this continuity traced from the ideal of equality, the second reason why Facebook cannot abandon its own guidelines will be discussed. The perspective from the user of Facebook will be considered. The way Facebook is used will show how it cannot extract itself from the political function it inherently has.

2.1.1 Continuity between Habermas and Facebook: equality and status

As elaborated on in the previous Chapter, Habermas sees equality amongst participants as one of the key characteristics of his public sphere. However, this ideal was imperfectly realised in the bourgeois public sphere. Section 1.2.1 touched upon the

role that status can play both on- and offline. In fact, sociological research shows how status can be an important factor in group dynamics. The more status one has, the more one is revered and the interaction in the group changes.[55] Habermas might claim all participants in the philosophical salon are equal and leave their status upon entering the room. However, research suggests that the simple watchmaker and the prince participating in a discussion would not necessarily have been seen as equals, as socioeconomic status could threaten the group dynamic, amongst other factors.[56]

The literature referred to above is literature on general social interactions. Delving deeper into literature about the customs of the philosophical salons, it becomes clear how reputation and status also in particular affected the salons, albeit mainly the reputation of the manager of the salon. These were usually women, who could select guests, moderate and determine the subject matter of the discussions. While neutrality, impartiality and equality was the goal to strive for, there are signs that there had to be a reputation built first in order for people to *believe* a salon was impartial and equal. To put it simply: a salon – and the woman managing it – had to have gained the reputation of impartiality and equality in order to pass as impartial and equal.

The women led the discussions, but it was not merely their intellectual capabilities that counted. They also had to be entertaining and of right mood and mind in order to capture their audience. Simply having the right content was not enough. This is illustrated for example in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which at several points describes the inner workings of the salons. In particular, it shows how a charismatic woman with a good reputation carried her salon, while in reality it did not matter whether she truly possessed the knowledge she exhibited to her audience: "[...] Hélène Bezukhova's reputation *d'une femme charmante et spirituelle* became so firmly established that she could say the emptiest and stupidest things and yet everybody would go into raptures over every word of hers, and look for a profound meaning in it of which she herself had no conception."[57] Similarly, a knowledgeable salon manager with a bad reputation might not win over the literary crowds, as can be read in S.G.

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[55] Cameron Anderson, John Angus D. Hildreth, and Laura Howland, 2015, "Is the Desire for Status a Fundamental Human Motive? A Review of the Empirical Literature", *Psychological Bulletin 141*, no. 3.
[56] Ibid., p. 577.
[57] Leo Tolstoy, 1993, *War and Peace,* Translated by Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude, Wordsworth Classics, Herts, UK: Wordsworth Editions, p. 470.

Tallentyre's *The Women of the Salons:* "As for his wife, 'Who is this upstart?' say the other women at first. 'A little Swiss Protestant from Crassier? Somebody's poor companion, quite unnecessarily good-looking? The wife of a *bourgeois*? Bah!'"[58] Additionally, there are references on how in particular Jewish women served as good salon managers, because Jews supposedly were excellent at being impartial.[59] All of the above suggests that reputation had a significant effect on the salons and the people running them, to the extent that it cannot be overlooked when describing their workings in regards to the public sphere. This also means that the equality principle comes into question, as we can imagine how those with a better reputation were seen as higher than those with a low reputation. Thus, a true equality in the salons could never really be guaranteed. While this equality might not have truly been there, the ideal of equality still guided the salons. After all, people wanted the salon they attended to have the reputation of impartiality and equality, supposedly because they cared for and strove towards those ideals being realised.

Although the ideal of equality was not always perfectly realised in the philosophical salons, it did not stop the pursuit of that ideal. Facebook also strives for the ideal of equality, and in fact has also make some improvements from the Habermasian public sphere when it comes to this ideal. What those improvements show is that Facebook actively pursues the same ideals that govern the Habermasian public sphere.

Although both the Habermasian and digital public sphere have their faults in expressing the ideal of equality, Facebook does do a better job at providing a platform for more people. Facebook might not provide an equality in *reach* – which can be seen in the amount of friends and followers a user has as described in section 1.2.1. However, it does provide an equality in *access*. The members of the Habermasian public sphere had to be propertied and educated individuals, which immediately excluded most of the population of that time. However, nowadays everyone with an internet connection can access Facebook. Granted, this still provides an inequality in access for a big portion of the world's population. However, with more than half of the world's population having access to the internet, it can certainly be said that the accessibility

[58] S.G. Tallentyre, 1901, "The Women of the Salons", *Longman's magazine,* 38(224), p. 503.
[59] Hannah Arendt, 1958, *Rahel Varnhage, the life of a Jewess,* London: Published for the Institute by the East and West Library, p. 122.

of Facebook is far greater than that of the Habermasian public sphere. There is also virtually no gatekeeping[60]: everyone can post something on Facebook and participate in discussions, whereas in the philosophical salons the threshold of participation is much higher. This shows how even though the execution of the ideal of equality has not always been perfect, the ideal is still guiding the practices of Facebook to the extent that it provides a space in which anyone can start participating.

Therefore, there are certain ideals that Habermas envisioned, such as equality, which were imperfectly realised in the bourgeois public sphere. The continuity to Facebook can be seen in this aspect, where equality is striven for on paper, but – as section 1.2.1 shows – in practice it goes amiss. In this, the internet is not inherently different than the non-internet era that preceded it. What carries on from both eras is that equality is still considered an ideal worth pursuing. It is in the execution in both the Habermasian public sphere and the digital one where this goes astray. If the Habermasian ideal was never abandoned in that public sphere, even though in practice it did not always succeed, then there is no reason for Facebook to lower its standards and stop pursuing the ideals of the public sphere either. Furthermore, Facebook itself also shows a commitment to the pursuit of those ideals, by for example even improving from the Habermasian public sphere in terms of equality in access.

2.1.2 The perspective of the Facebook user

The second reason why Facebook cannot abandon its strive towards the ideals of the public sphere lies on the side of the Facebook user. As mentioned before, Facebook users use Facebook at least partially as a way of reading up on news.[61] This news is subsequently discussed on the platform and can be a way of facilitating (political) debate. In other words: Facebook is used as a political platform. If that is what Facebook is used for by its users, then the company cannot simply abandon that function. This is especially the case as there is no real alternative to Facebook: the company has a monopoly position in the market of social media networks, a perspective that will be dealt with further in Chapter 3. Additionally, Facebook has

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[60] Mike S. Schäfer, 2015, "Digital public sphere", *The international encyclopedia of political communication,* 15: p. 3.
[61] Statista, 2022, "Social media activities on select social networks by social media users in the United States in February 2019", https://www.statista.com/statistics/200843/social-media-activities-by-platform-usa/.

historically developed by completely embracing whatever it is that its users wanted to use it for.[62] Listening and allowing the website to go wherever its users wanted it to go is what has eventually led up to it being what it is now. With this intentional unintentionality in regards to Facebook's course, the company cannot act surprised to find itself bestowed with the function it now has. The political function can also be found in the public sphere. Facebook as a public sphere has the capacity to put matters of common concern up for discussion there, as the Habermasian public sphere also did. This is facilitated by the fact that Facebook is separate from the state. This separation of institutions is what makes it possible to facilitate those kinds of discussions, and it is a crucial function of the public sphere.

Furthermore, reading up on news and discussing that news is not the only way Facebook turns into a political platform. Facebook allows users to post whatever they want on the platform (as long as it does not violate the community guidelines). This can be simple and personal status updates, such as someone commenting on how her husband earns more money than her for the same type of work. This can initially be a personal – at first glance apolitical – post, sharing a frustration. However, this can grow out into a more general discussion on the gender wage gap. It is expressions such as these that contribute to a sphere in which political topics of common concern are discussed, as is the function of a public sphere. In other words: the private is the political. It is out of private utterances such as these that the larger political discussions follow. It is the same in the Habermasian public sphere, exemplified by the women of the salons reacting in disdain when a new *salonnière* does not fit the description of a typical salon manager.[63] This also shows how social norms that were seen as apolitical were never truly without politics. The political is in the intimate: the disdain of the wife of a bourgeois shows an underlying political standpoint in regards to class and status.

If Facebook offers itself as the free and open platform that it is, it automatically opens up the potential to having a politically relevant purpose. If Facebook were to change its mind on this and say that its platform is not political, then it decides beforehand what is and what is not political. That is the essence of how the political grows out of the intimate. It would then have to forbid the woman to post about her husband's earnings.

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[62] Obear, *Columbia Business Law Review,* p. 1025.
[63] Tallentyre, *Longman's magazine,* p. 503.

Because statements such as that, even if they start from a personal and intimate place, can grow to political discussions and topics surrounding the wage gap in this example. Thus, Facebook cannot simply say that their platform is not political. In fact, Facebook determining beforehand that it does not want to be political, is precisely what makes it political. By then denying posts such as the woman commenting about the wage gap, it is applying a censorship Facebook strives so hard to avoid both in its own community guidelines and by its pursuit of the Habermasian ideals. This is what the Habermasian public sphere proves as well: statements can become politicized, even if they originally were not intended for that. If Facebook were to then distance itself from the ideals guiding a public sphere, it would distance itself from the political function it has. This would lead to a type of censorship and an inherently political stance, both of which Facebook actively tries to avoid. Thus, extracting itself from the responsibilities of ensuring a public sphere and abandoning the political function Facebook has is both undesirable and impossible with the way that Facebook itself wishes to operate.

2.1.3 Facebook: a continuation of Habermas and inherently political

As described in section 1.2, there are areas in which Facebook falls short when comparing its strive towards the ideals governing the public sphere on paper and in practice. This can give the impression that Facebook is not a public sphere, or should stop attempting to be one. However, what this section has shown is that the political function that a public sphere has is engrained in the social interaction and community on Facebook. It is not possible – nor desirable – to get that out. Additionally, by showing the continuation from the Habermasian public sphere to Facebook more in depth, as section 2.1.1 did, it is possible to say that those Habermasian ideals are a part of the way Facebook is supposed to function. The ways that Facebook then falls short as described in section 1.2 teaches the lesson that it needs to go further in realising the ideals governing a public sphere, instead of ending the pursuit of those ideals altogether. The next half of this Chapter will discuss the two main problems Facebook faces: polarisation and fake news. After delineating these main issues, the final Chapter will answer the question on whose responsibility it is to solve these problems.

2.2 The two main problems of Facebook

Now that it is established why Facebook cannot lower its standards and abandon its ideals of a public sphere, it is time to consider the main problems Facebook has more

in depth. The two problems selected for this thesis are belief polarisation and fake news. Naturally, Facebook faces more problems than those two. However, these problems are selected for this thesis as they are the problems mostly associated with the functions for which people use Facebook. They are at the same time the problems that hinder the function of Facebook as a public sphere the most. After these are delineated more in depth, Chapter 3 will answer the question as to whose responsibility it is to solve these problems.

2.2.1 The fusion of political and personal identity and belief polarisation

The main difference between the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook lies not necessarily in the content, but rather in the way that content is expressed. This fundamental change lies in the fact that societal communication is changed by the new media. These new media constitute a different form of activity and being together. To be specific, the way people engage in politics has changed through digital communication. Political parties organise through Facebook, people inform themselves through the platform and discuss matters of common concern there. Here the first signs of the fusion between the private and the political can be seen.

Digital developments modify what is relevant and what is not, and change the way we share information. In practice, this new way of communicating and sharing information means people check social media more and also news is read more on there. This draws in politicians and political parties to make their stance known on certain topics, because they feel like they have to, as social media such as Facebook function as the new discussion fora. Not being on social media means missing out on connecting with potential constituents. This means that politics is now injected into a medium that initially was thought of – and still partially used as – a way of simply connecting with friends and hanging out online. The consequence of this is that the line between the personal and impersonal gets blurred: the line between forms of friendship and sharing political ideas fades. Eventually this leads to people themselves being tied to their political ideas as a part of their personality or identity. This is reflected in statistical data: over the years with the use of social media rising, people have been getting not necessarily more extreme in their political views, but they do

become more consistent.[64] What this entails is that rather than having a leftist view on one topic and a rightist view on another, voters are more likely to be either completely left or completely right. Nowadays it is more likely when someone is pro-military to automatically be anti-abortion, for example, even if these two topics seemingly have little to no overlap. Citizens are becoming more partisan and more consistent, which can be attributed to the fact that the line between the personal and impersonal gets blurred on Facebook. This means users are more likely to see their identity as tied to their political opinions, making them more likely to 'buy the whole package' of political ideals instead of carefully evaluating how they feel on each particular topic. This is additionally stimulated by filter bubbles and echo chambers, which is a topic that will be discussed more in depth in the next section.

These dynamics can lead to belief polarisation, which is amplified by the way social media such as Facebook functions. To put it simply, Facebook benefits from this partisan way of platform engagement. The reason for this is that Facebook makes its money by selling advertisements. The more time users spend on the platform, the more ads will be seen, making buying advertisement space more valuable for advertisers. Therefore, Facebook wants to keep its users on the platform as long as possible.[65] One way to do this is to have an algorithm determine what each individual user enjoys seeing and interacting with, and then giving that user more of that type of content.[66] In innocuous cases this is harmless: if someone enjoys watching videos of cute cats, being presented with more of those videos because the algorithm determined your preference is not a problematic thing in itself. However, it does become a problem when it comes to more serious matters such as political preference and the type of news a user consumes. As mentioned earlier, politics is now heavily present in a medium that was not initially meant for this. If the algorithm filters one's preference on political topics the same way it does on leisurely topics, then we run the risk of presenting each user exclusively with news they already agree with. Research shows that when partisan identity gets associated with scientific facts, the acceptance of those fact can change

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64 Pew Research Center, 2014, "Political polarization in the American public", https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/section-1-growing-ideological-consistency/.
65 Obear, *Columbia Business Law Review,* p. 998.
66 Eli Pariser, 2011, *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you,* New York: The Penguin Press, p. 10.

based on which side of the political spectrum the person identifies with.[67] In other words, political identity can get in the way of accepting certain truths, which will get exacerbated by media such as Facebook that stimulate this dynamic.

Additionally, if every user sees a different type of news and different type of political content, then in discussions they are arguing with a different set of information. In the salons this was radically different: all participants were presented with the same reality. Naturally disagreements and discussions happened there too – which is certainly a positive for the sake of proper discourse – but at least the participants were having those discussions with the same set of information. Thus, the online space of Facebook does not facilitate a proper space for discussion, as participants in that discussion all step in with a different set of information. This hurts the dynamics and functions of a public sphere. Additionally, people have a tendency to look for confirmation bias.[68] If this dynamic continues long enough, each user eventually lives in their own filtered social media bubble, which are also called echo chambers. This contributes to political polarisation, as is seen in the data presented earlier where voters are less and less likely to find common ground and mutual understanding.

This section highlighted the first major break from the Habermasian public sphere and one of the main problems of Facebook: the fusion between one's personal and political identity. In the Habermasian public sphere these two were separated, as one's personal status or background was not supposed to matter in the salons. However, on Facebook this has changed, as Facebook is an inherently personal medium. Because Facebook is a personal medium in which politics is now heavily infused, and because of the way Facebook functions with its algorithm use, the line between the personal and the impersonal gets blurred. The way Facebook's algorithm functions amplifies this and also highlight this new problem of political polarisation. People only see news that confirms what they already believed, creating online echo chambers and enhancing political polarisation. Due to the fact that this is happening on a personal platform, there is now no meaningful way to distinguish between forms of intimacy and forms of sharing political ideas. All of this hinders the pursuit of rational discussion – a key

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[67] Toby Bolsen and James N. Druckman, 2018, "Do partisanship and politicization undermine the impact of a scientific consensus message about climate change?", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations,* 21(3): pp. 389–402.
[68] Ibid., pp. 50-51.

component of the public sphere – and undermines the function of Facebook as an inherently political platform. This is already a problem in its own, but the problem is only enhanced more with another new player in the field of (political) communication: fake news. The next section will deal with this second notable break from the Habermasian public sphere, that only further enhances the problems mentioned in this section.

2.2.2 Fake news

The previous section highlighted the problem and cause of political polarisation, and the fusion of political and personal identity. The way Facebook's algorithm functions is that it determines the type of content a user typically enjoys, and subsequently feeds them more of the same content. In cases of politics and news, this means only information that is already established that the user enjoys and agrees with will be shown. This makes discussion more difficult, as not all people step into the discussion with the same set of information. Additionally, the more people get confirmed in their own biases, the more enhanced the political polarisation will become. This problem only gets exacerbated with the introduction of fake news.

Over recent years, fake news is becoming more of a problem on social media such as Facebook.[69] As mentioned before, Facebook shows a user the type of content they usually interact with. If someone were to look for conspiracy theories or click on a link from a conspiracy theory page, Facebook's algorithm will take that as a sign the user enjoys that type of content and will keep showing them more. Then, something that might have started out as an act of curiosity can throw the user into a rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, while at the same time presenting that as credible news. Social media sites recognize this problem and have tried to do something to flag fake news or even remove it.[70] However, they are not doing enough as fake news is still a problem with big consequences.[71]

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[69] Christine Geeng, Savanna Yee and Franziska Roesner, 2020, "Fake news on Facebook and Twitter: Investigating how people (don't) investigate", *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI conference on human factors in computer systems,* pp. 1-14.

[70] Iosifidis and Nicoli, *International Communication Gazette,* p. 64.

[71] Noah Giansiracusa, 2021, "How Facebook Hides How Terrible It Is With Hate Speech", *Wired,* https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-deceptive-math-when-it-comes-to-hate-speech/.

This leads to a distrust in Facebook, even though people regularly get their news from the website.[72] This has real consequences, such as election meddling and the undermining of democracy. This stands in stark contrast to the functions of a public sphere. Naturally with these factors becoming more known to the public, people are starting to trust the things they read on social media such as Facebook less. This could be seen as positive. However, as long as people are still regularly getting their news from the website, it is not a positive factor if that news is generally not trusted. An additional problem is that while most people are generally distrustful of the news they read on Facebook, statistical data shows that the more an individual uses Facebook for news, the more they trust that news being accurate.[73] So while most users who only sometimes use Facebook distrust what they read, the people who actually mostly if not completely get their news from there trust in it completely. This means that they trust their partisan, personally selected and perhaps even fake news the most.

The introduction of fake news stands in stark contrast to the Habermasian public sphere. It is imaginable that during the time of the philosophical salons, there was (political) advertising and subjective news outlets. However, the crucial difference is that during that time each individual was in principle able to retrieve the same information as others. With the introduction of fake news and the exacerbation of political polarisation this is no longer possible, or at the very least a lot more difficult. Someone with leftist standpoints will rarely – if ever – interact online with news articles containing opposite standpoints and vice versa.

The reason fake news can take hold so much on Facebook is due to the same mechanisms that fuel political polarisation. Facebook's current policy is all about promoting interactions, keeping users on the website and thus generating more profit from advertisements. It is then the algorithm and the profit motive driving it that is the problem. Here one of the ideals of the public sphere becomes compromised: the limited importance of profit is not guaranteed. Additionally, the ideal of rational discussion

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[72] Pew Research Center, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms in 2020", https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/.
[73] Pew Research Center, 2020, "An oasis of bipartisanship: Republicans and Democrats distrust social media sites for political and election news", https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/29/an-oasis-of-bipartisanship-republicans-and-democrats-distrust-social-media-sites-for-political-and-election-news/.

gets called into question as well. If Facebook users step into discussions with different information sets, which might include fake news, then rational discussion is undermined. Thus, not guaranteeing the norms of the public sphere means big problems such as fake news get exacerbated. This is both by not keeping the profit motive in check and pursuing it above all others, as well as undermining rational discussion by not allowing users to engage with the same set of information and running the risk of exposure to fake news.

2.2.3 Chapter conclusion – The pursuit of the Habermasian ideals

The first part of this Chapter answered the question as to why Facebook should even try to pursue the ideals of the public sphere. Why not stop trying to realise those ideals if the result will not be perfect either way? I expanded on an inherent continuity from the Habermasian publics sphere to Facebook, by tracing the ideal of equality. This showed that status leads to an imperfect execution of this ideal in both the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook. In addition, Facebook even improves on the ideal of equality in regards to the Habermasian public sphere. This improvement shows a continuity due to the fact that it is executing the same ideal. What this continuation shows is that while the ideal might not always be executed perfectly, it is still strived for and regulates the space. Therefore, if the ideals of the public sphere are not always perfectly realised in the Habermasian form, this is no reason to stop pursuing those ideals altogether. Additionally, the way Facebook is utilized by its users shows how Facebook cannot simply stop trying to be a public sphere. Facebook is a medium so infused with political potential, that it cannot remove that political purpose from the platform even if it wanted to.

The second part of this Chapter explained the two major breaks from the Habermasian public sphere: The fusion of political and personal identity, highlighted by political polarisation and echo chambers, and the introduction of fake news. Both have a significant effect on the way discussion is held and on the reliability of the provided information on the website. These differences highlight the starkest problems for Facebook and are a result of not following the ideals that guide a public sphere.

The next and final Chapter will deal with the consequences that follow from this. Now that the norms regulating both the Habermasian public sphere and Facebook have

been distilled, the reason for continuing the pursuit of those norms has been determined, and the two major problems of Facebook have been established, it is time to ask the question regarding responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to mitigate these two major problems? The third Chapter will consider this in depth and show how it is in the end the responsibility of Facebook itself to implement the changes necessary to provide the right platform that caters to the norms guiding a public sphere.

Chapter 3

The third and final Chapter will deal with the implementation of the previous Chapters and what all of this means for Facebook. It will answer the question of which actor's responsibility it is to ensure a proper user experience when engaging in discussion on Facebook. This entails ensuring that the Habermasian norms will be lived by, and that in particular political polarisation and fake news will be prevented. It has become evident that there are changes that need to be made on Facebook. If Facebook acts as a public sphere and there is a continuity with the Habermasian public sphere, then the same norms that regulate the Habermasian public sphere should regulate the activities on Facebook. Eventually, it will be evident how Facebook itself is the only viable actor that can ensure this. To arrive at this conclusion, all possible actors will be considered: governments, individual users, and lastly Facebook itself.

3.1. Governments

When it comes to determining who is responsible for ensuring something that will protect citizens, it is tempting to say that it is up to governments to ensure this. After all, governments are responsible for many parts of its citizens' lives, including several aspects of the digital domain. Governments are gradually catching up on digital developments and are making laws accordingly. This is on various different domains, such as privacy, data collection, accessibility and others.[74] Therefore, it would at first glance make sense that it is up to governments to put limitations on companies such

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[74] Digitale Overheid, 2022, "Wetgeving", https://www.digitaleoverheid.nl/overzicht-van-alle-onderwerpen/wetgeving/.

as Facebook and essentially design legislation to 'force' Facebook to change. However, there are several reasons why this is not feasible.

The first reason is a practical reason: Facebook is a global company, meaning it has to deal with many different governments. Therefore, there is no single government who can decide what Facebook in general can and cannot do. Of course, a government can decide for its own country that the way Facebook manages its platform is no longer acceptable in that country. However, this would not prove to be a fruitful strategy, as that would mean potentially cutting the country off of what could be seen as an essential means of online communication. The desirability of such a solution can be contested. It also does not tackle the problem at its source: if Facebook needs to change due to inherent problems in its own execution, merely cutting off certain countries does not change Facebook. It merely changes the exposure in those particular countries.

The second reason why governments are no proper actors for ensuring the proper online space on Facebook is more fundamental. Facebook is attempting to follow the norms distilled from the Habermasian public sphere, and the detachment from state authority is a key norm. The whole purpose of the public sphere was to be free from the state authority as to be able to properly criticize it. Facebook shares this sentiment as a free and open space, not managed or monitored by governments. There are governments in the world who do monitor their social media. For example, in China Facebook is not allowed, and its citizens have various other digital media such as the government-backed WeChat instead. This contributes to the limited freedom of speech and lessened democratic values in the country. There are for example 'internet police forces' who are tasked with ensuring China's tight internet rules are obeyed, which leads to the following reality: "[…] Internet users, though nominally anonymous, are not invisible any longer, particularly for their online supervisors and surveillants."[75] One of Facebook's core values is to avoid such practices. However, it would be too quick to say that because of one bad example, a government-backed service such as WeChat would automatically be wrong. To take a hypothetical scenario: imagine a government-backed service such as WeChat, but with no malevolent intent and more robust privacy protection in place, meaning the government cannot actively track you and the

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[75] Ibid.

platform has no obligation to share its data with the government. A platform where democratic values can be expressed in, and it is possible to criticize the platform on that platform. It offers individuals the chance to discuss in a space explicitly designed for the purposes of rational discussion, such as was intended in the Habermasian public sphere. The real question would then be if this is would be problematic as well for a public sphere.

Looking back at how the public sphere historically developed according to Habermas, this was always in contrast to the state authority. The first developments of the public sphere were in combination with economic changes, where trade made it necessary for people to share knowledge of other places. Combined with the emergence of rational-critical debate, a public sphere separate from the state authority developed. To put it simply: the public sphere could be the public sphere *because of* this separation from the state. Therefore, if there were a hypothetical, benevolent, democratic and government-backed platform, designed for rational-critical debate, it would still not fulfil one of the crucial requirements of the public sphere. It is because of the separation of institutions that Facebook has the ability to offer the open space that it has, as the Habermasian public sphere did as well. Thus, putting the responsibility on governments to change the public sphere of Facebook would be blurring the line between institutions, a line that is so crucial to maintain for a public sphere to fulfil its primary functions. It is therefore not an option that governmental influences affect the company by forcing its hand.

Additionally, as is described in section 2.1.2, in a public sphere political interactions grow from the intimate. It is Facebook users who wish to use the platform for such purposes, who want to share matters that can grow to be political. It would be overreaching for governments to make policies on how Facebook should manage this type of communication on its platform, when it is the users themselves who partly determine its function by engaging on it. However, this does not mean all responsibility falls on Facebook users themselves, as will be made clear in section 3.2.

To conclude, both pragmatically and – more importantly – fundamentally, it would not be possible to put the responsibility of Facebook's issues on governments. It is constitutive of the public sphere that a separation from state authority is ensured.

Involving governments into the equation would be blurring a line that is crucial to maintain for a public sphere to fulfil its primary functions. It would also be considered an overreach, as it is the users of Facebook who determine the function of Facebook. The next logical step would then to conclude that Facebook's users are responsible for Facebook's issues. However, the next section will show how this is not feasible either.

3.2 Individuals

The second possible actor in ensuring that the Habermasian norms keep regulating the activities and interactions on Facebook are Facebook users themselves. As mentioned in section 2.2.2, Facebook as a company is already attempting to fix the problems of belief polarisation and fake news. However, it is thus far not enough. Therefore, one could argue how the users themselves need to step up and put in their share of work. However, research into the interaction with fake news shows how there are various reasons people are either unable or unwilling to do this. They could suffer from political burn-out, have the wrong verification strategies, or simply not have the time to check every post they read.[76] Asides from the practical difficulties that all of these strategies bring, even if individual users wanted to find their own resources and tackle political polarisation and fake news, there is a chance they will not be successful. Not only could they have their own faulty tactics, the system works against these effort. It is designed to only show you that particular content that you regularly interact with, and is also designed to appeal to emotion as it has learned that appealing to emotion will lead to more user engagement. With all these nuanced complications, it cannot be reasonably expected from a user to put in all the time and effort to ensure real news from multiple perspectives reaches their timeline.

However, a counterpoint could be that individuals are not completely absolved from all responsibility. For example, when considering traditional newspapers, we do not expect the readers to fact-check what they read. It is assumed that newspapers have done this themselves already as they are assumed to carry a certain responsibility towards their reader. However, plenty of newspapers also have sections of opinion pieces. What those show is that it is expected of readers to read such pieces and not blindly accept everything as truths. Readers are relied on to know that what they are

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[76] Geeng, Yee and Roesner, *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI conference on human factors in computer systems,* p. 2.

reading are critical opinions that are not supposed to be blindly believed. Stepping away from the newspaper analogy, it is also expected from people in general to not carelessly and irrevocably accept everything they hear. If someone at a party were to tell me that the sky is green and water is orange, I would be foolish to simply accept what I hear as fact. We expect the average person to have a certain capability to use their common sense in determining true from false, which does not absolve the individual of all responsibility when it comes to fake news on Facebook either. If the rationality and common sense of people can be relied on in the instances mentioned above, could the same be said in regards to Facebook?

To a certain extent it would not be unreasonable to hold Facebook users accountable for spotting obvious falsehoods they encounter on the platform. It could also be slightly insulting to assume all Facebook users cannot determine fact from fiction. However, this argument mostly holds up in obvious cases where it is truly easy to distinguish real from fake. For example, we are used to ads being relatively recognizable: they pop up on our timelines telling us to buy certain products. However, partially as a move against ad blockers, ads have been 'disguising' themselves as news articles.[77] This interferes with the ability of the observer to form a rational opinion. The same difficulty arrives with fake news, which often looks real, especially if one has interacted with the same type of content before. Therefore, it would be justified to appeal to an individual's common sense when determining, for example, if something is a pop-up ad or actual news. However, it gets harder to appeal to that intuition and the skill of the consumer when the difference needs to be determined between two incredibly similar articles, with one being sponsored content and the other being actual news.

Another reason why individuals cannot be the ones responsible for 'fixing' Facebook has to do with the factor of choice. When people join Facebook, this is usually for one of the main reasons Facebook is used: connecting with friends, sharing content and posts or reading up on the news.[78] Facebook users spend the most time on their

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[77] Eric Zeng, Tadayoshi Kohno and Franziska Roesner, 2020, "Bad news: Clickbait and deceptive ads on news and misinformation websites", *Workshop on Technology and Consumer Protection,* University of Washington: pp. 1-11.

[78] Statista, 2022, "Social media activities on select social networks by social media users in the United States in February 2019", https://www.statista.com/statistics/200843/social-media-activities-by-platform-usa/.

personalised timeline (front page). However, what they see on their timeline is for a part not content they choose to see. Some of the content may be posts from friends they chose to befriend or pages they chose to follow. Yet there is plenty of content only presented to the person as 'suggested posts', which is determined by the algorithm that the user will probably enjoy. It is hard to extract oneself from this type of content, as one simple click on a particular type of video can lead to Facebook continuously showing the same type of videos. It also over time gets more difficult to remove oneself from particular kinds of posts if a user decides they do not want to see that type of content anymore, because they have been so engaged with it in the past. Additionally, a part of the way your probable enjoyment of a post is determined is how long the engagement lasts.[79] This means that the longer the user engages with the post, the more similar content will be presented. Ironically, this also entails that if a user spends more time engaging with a post to find out how to *not* view this type of content, Facebook will read that as a sign the post is enjoyed and will show you more of the same.

Lastly, a public sphere is made up from the combination of all individuals. It is not the moral responsibility of those individuals to 'fix' the public sphere, because the public sphere by definition transcends the individual level. Facebook is also hardly the platform where such a feat could even be achieved, as it is a place without any sort of spontaneous order.

Thus, there is some individual responsibility to be taken in regards to spotting fake news and managing your own timeline, for example by blocking certain posts or people or by being able to make distinctions in fake and real content. However, this responsibility has its limits as some actions are beyond the control of the user. Additionally, the problems on Facebook are inherently not the responsibility of the user. The reason the problems of Facebook are exacerbated is through the policies and mechanisms that the company itself has employed. It is therefore unreasonable to expect its users to fix the problems the company created. Users can still choose to contribute, for example by flagging fake news when they see it and thereby informing the company. However, it is important that this remains a free choice and does not impose a responsibility on the user where there is little to none. If the algorithm is the

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[79] Facebook for Business, 2022, *Suggested Posts on Facebook Feed,* https://www.facebook.com/business/help/1082519118875784.

reason it is so difficult for users of Facebook to get reliable information on the website, then it is obvious what needs to change. Facebook as the party that owns and deploys the algorithm is the only one who can change it.

3.3 Facebook

This then leads to the third and final candidate for solving the problems on Facebook: Facebook itself. While initially this would seem like an argumentation based on the process of elimination, there certainly are reasons for Facebook to be the only logical choice for this.

Firstly, Facebook has a monopoly position in the market of social media companies.[80] This is a position that has not been achieved by accident: as a commercial company Facebook has striven towards domination in the world of social media. This is exemplified by its mother company buying various other social media networks such as Instagram and WhatsApp. That being said, such a monopoly position cannot be without responsibilities. When it comes to social network platforms, it can be argued that there is no true alternative for Facebook. Chapter 1 has delineated where Facebook falls in the platform / publisher dichotomy. As a platform it is an online space for hanging out, interaction, planning gatherings and reading up on news. However, it also has the functioning of a publisher in some aspects, such as the moderating of content and the introduction of the News Tab. It also has the potential for essential means of communication, as was the case during the Arab Spring. All of this means Facebook is a unique platform with great potential, and can be seen as an essential means of online communication. Therefore, there is no true alternative to Facebook. When leaving no true alternative for its users, Facebook has the responsibility to ensure its website is functioning without the problems of fake news and polarisation. Moreover, Facebook has already shown in the past to care about creating a space most desired by its users. From the start the company has developed with no singular business strategy in order to play into what the users wanted over time, ensuring a certain adaptability to cater to what its users wanted most.[81]

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[80] Obear, *Columbia Business Law Review,* p. 994.
[81] Ibid., p. 1025.

The users of Facebook are using the platform in a certain way that correlates with the activities of a public sphere. As section 2.1.2 has shown, Facebook carries with it an inherently political function, one that cannot simply be abandoned. If Facebook users want to use it in a way that can end up being political, and there are problems on Facebook that hinder the website from functioning in that fashion, then Facebook cannot simply say that it will not solve them. Facebook as a private company functions as a public service, as it facilitates a crucial component of society with little alternative, in this case in the field of interpersonal communication. By comparing this to other public services, such as public transport, it becomes apparent how the faults of the company cannot simply fall on any other party except on the company itself. For example, in the Netherlands public transport is privatised, but the Nederlandse Spoorwegen (NS) has a monopoly position in the market of train transport, leaving little to no true alternatives for travellers in most parts of the country. In April 2022 the NS had a major malfunction due to which trains would not be able to take off at all. Afterwards there had been criticism stating that some trains might have been able to take off and that the company did not put in the effort to provide alternative transport.[82] No one would think to blame any party but the public transport itself. After all, the public transport is the cause of the problem, there are no real alternatives in the world of public transport as it has a monopoly position on its market, and it is the only one with the tools to fix it. Facebook is also a monopoly player in its market, there are no real alternatives in the world of social media, and Facebook is the only one with the means to fix its problems.

A rebuttal could be that Facebook is a private company, making money is the entire point, and people should not 'hate the player, but hate the game'. However, there are several problems with a rebuttal in this spirit. Firstly, due to its wilfully acquired monopoly position, Facebook has become more than merely a player. It is not only a player, but a player purposefully manipulating the game – if the game can be seen as the market of social media networks.[83] Secondly, asides from a private company, this thesis has shown already that Facebook is a public sphere. Therefore, Facebook is not just a company, and rebuttals solely relying on the factor that it is a private company

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[82] NOS, 2022, "Staatssecretaris Noemt Aanpak NS-Storing 'Onder De Maat', Ook FNV Kritisch", *NOS*, https://nos.nl/artikel/2423860-staatssecretaris-noemt-aanpak-ns-storing-onder-de-maat-ook-fnv-kritisch.
[83] Obear, *Columbia Business Law Review,* p. 1050.

are forgetting the function it has as a public sphere and the responsibilities that come with that.

As mentioned in the previous section, the reason the problems surrounding political polarisation and fake news are exacerbated is at least partially due to the way Facebook's algorithm functions. This is then a problem only Facebook can fix as the owner and user of the algorithm. However, it goes deeper than merely changing the algorithm – which is not even an easy feat on its own. It is also important to consider *why* the algorithm functions the way it does. The algorithm is designed to keep a user on the website as long as possible. This is because the more time is spent on Facebook, the more ads can be sold. So in the end, the reason the algorithm is designed the way it is, is because it is more profitable and sells more ads. Therefore, the profit motive is the true incentive for the way Facebook functions. This obviously directly clashes with one of the main Habermasian norms: the limited importance of profit. To recapitulate: having a profit motive on its own is not a bad thing. However, when a company that models itself after the public sphere starts to value profit above all else, this becomes problematic. Additionally, the profit motive has seeped into all the other motives. For example, Facebook is a company that attaches great value to equality, both on paper and in some of its practices. However, as of right now equality is not winning out against the profit motive. This is because profit has been infused in the other motives.

Moreover, as section 1.2.2 has shown, Facebooks strives towards the realisation of rational discussion, which is hindered by polarisation and fake news. Having made the comparison between Facebook and the Habermasian public sphere it has become clear that Facebook as the 'host' of the discussion space carries the responsibility to facilitate rational discussion. However, the way the website and its algorithm function clash with this purpose. Facebook could choose to leave its algorithm the way it is and choose the profit motive over all other motives, leaving the Habermasian norms behind. However, section 2.1 has shown how Facebook cannot simply do this due to the continuation of Habermas to Facebook and by showing the inherent political potential of Facebook. If Facebook were to then distance itself from the ideals guiding a public sphere, it would distance itself from the political function it has. The result of which – a type of censorship and an inherently political stance – is something Facebook wants to avoid.

There is therefore a responsibility for Facebook to keep pursuing the ideals in practice that it ascribes to on paper.

3.4 Chapter conclusion – Responsibility of whom

This final Chapter has shown how Facebook is the responsible actor to ensure the Habermasian norms are followed and to solve the problems of fake news and polarisation.

Firstly, governments have been shown to be unable to do this as it is constitutive of a public sphere to have a separation from state authority. It would furthermore be considered an overreach on a platform of which the purpose is partially determined by its users. However, individual users themselves also cannot (fully) be held responsible. Some actions are beyond the control of the user, the factor of choice plays into it, and the users are not responsible for creating the problems. Furthermore, the public sphere by definition transcends the individual level.

Lastly, Facebook was evaluated and it was determined that Facebook is the responsible actor in ensuring the Habermasian norms are lived by in practice, in particular by tackling the problems of fake news and polarisation. This has been established not only by the process of elimination, but also for inherent reasons: it is the owner and user of the algorithms exacerbating the problems of fake news and polarisation, it has wilfully acquired a monopoly position that is not without responsibility, and – perhaps most importantly – the role it has as a public sphere demands it takes responsibilities for that sphere. As this thesis has shown, Facebook subscribes to the ideals of the public sphere, and not following those in practice has allowed the problems of fake news and polarisation to get worse. This is visible in how for example the profit motive has outweighed the other motives, such as the value of rational discourse and the strive for equality. Thus, Facebook cannot simply deny its function as a public sphere and discontinue the pursuit of the norms that regulate such a space. In particular, Facebook needs to ensure the problems of polarisation and fake news are mitigated.

Conclusion

This thesis started off aiming to answer the following question: whose responsibility is it to solve or mitigate the two major problems (polarisation and fake news) that Facebook is facing? The irrevocable answer to this question is that Facebook is the only one capable of and responsible for doing this. This was achieved by reviewing Facebook from the public sphere. Firstly, the public sphere according to Jürgen Habermas was explained. From his ideal public sphere, several norms have been distinguished that guide the practices in that public sphere. These are the norms of equality between participants, the power of the rational argument, the separation from state authority and the limited importance of profit. Subsequently, these norms were tested against Facebook, who subscribes to each of them on paper while not adhering to them in practice. This could lead to the pessimistic reader to claim Facebook should stop trying to adhere to the norms of the public sphere, when it cannot realise it anyway.

Chapter 2 started off rebutting this proposal. The Habermasian public sphere that Facebook models itself after was not perfect in practice either. A historical and literary tracing of the ideal of equality showed that status interfered with the workings of the public sphere. However, the fact that the ideal of equality was imperfectly realised did not mean that the ideal itself was abandoned or not striven for altogether. Facebook itself has also shown to actively strive towards this ideal, showing a commitment towards the ideal. Additionally, it was shown how Facebook is an inherently political medium. Facebook users use it as such and the political function is engrained into it. Therefore, Facebook cannot simply deny this function and discontinue the pursuit of the norms that regulate such a space. Doing this is already a political stance in and of itself. The second half of Chapter 2 delineated the two main problems of Facebook (polarisation and fake news), and how it affects the website as a public sphere.

Lastly, with all of this knowledge combined, Chapter 3 makes the final call in whose responsibility it is to solve these problems. First, governments were considered. Governments cannot be the responsible actors in solving these problems, due to the inherent separation from the state that is required by a public sphere. Second, individuals were considered. Individuals also cannot be held fully responsible, as a public sphere inherently transcends the individual level. Additionally, the way

Facebook functions makes it very difficult – if not downright impossible – for individual users to fix these problems themselves. Third, Facebook itself was considered, and it was shown how not only through the process of elimination, but also inherently Facebook is the one responsible for fixing the main problems of Facebook and ensuring the norms guiding a public sphere are adhered to in practice. Not only is Facebook the owner and user of the algorithms exacerbating the problems of fake news and polarisation, it also has a wilfully acquired monopoly position on the market which carries responsibilities with it. Furthermore, this thesis has shown how Facebook strives towards the ideal of the public sphere, meaning it has to follow suit on this promise and ensure those ideals are implemented to the best of its abilities. Thus, even if it were only a platform, as Facebook regularly claims, Facebook has the ethical responsibilities to ensure the activities on its platform are regulated by the same norms that the Habermasian public sphere is regulated by. In particular, Facebook needs to ensure the problems of polarisation and fake news are mitigated.

As a dominant social media company Facebook is embedded in multiple areas of life (law, politics, economics, and so forth) in a complicated manner. Establishing the precise consequences for such a company and the actions it needs to take is therefore no easy task. While this thesis has provided the basis of establishing who is responsible, further research into policy- and law-making will have to outline how these responsibilities ought to be concretely implemented in practice.

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