Media Platforms as Blockholes of Information: App Economy and Burial of User-Generated Content

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Abstract: The present paper discusses the change in accessibility and searchability of data due to the popularity of mobile app versions of social media. The main argument is that new social media platforms restrict the access of search engines to the user-generated contents that are created and exchanged within them, and such trends have made access to public content more difficult. Focusing on the phrases “platforms as information blockhole” and “burial of content”, this article is a conceptual paper that argues that in contrast with the idea of freedom of information and data in world-wide-web, today mobile app platforms have formed close-core databases that search engines are restricted to access to them. The article warns that due to the increasing popularity of social media platforms, a huge volume of information is being generated and exchanged within them and this leads to new discrimination in access to the information. It also stresses the necessity of new types of syndication contracts between search engines and platforms as a new business model; or new policies that guarantee the findability of generating and exchanging public data on social media platforms.

Keywords: Information Blockhole, Social platforms, Freedom of Data Access, Search Engine, App Economy

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1. Introduction

“Google it!”. This phrase changed our world by providing access to almost everything on the web, let’s say an infinitive volume of information about our known world. Forums, web communities, chat rooms, websites, bulletins, and all kinds of data exchange solutions on the web were indexed in google and therefore, findable, reachable, and usable. Google became and still is our gateway to the limitless world of information.

However, recently and due to the popularity of social media platforms, access to data is changing smoothly but gradually and steadily. Today, applications play a vital role in our everyday lives. From entertainment to education, and from personal to business communication. Thanks to mobile phones, they have become the always-on media that continuously collect information from users and create a huge volume of information in a very short period. This sounds fine and flawless, because it generates new information and big data that can be useful in the development of technology. But the main problem is that most of these platforms keep data very restricted and never allow search engines to access them, and therefore no access for the public. Now, we are experiencing a big gap in our access to information via google. Social media platforms keep the exchanging data exclusive and do not provide it to google and therefore, every day millions and billion of chunks of information are restored in social media platforms, without external access, or at least out of Google reach. Let’s consider Instagram. This social media is extremely closed, even captions of photos and albums are not searchable for their users. Only hashtags can be used to find similar posts. No link to the web is allowed unless one link is in the bio. Every day millions of posts are shared on Instagram and, it can be said buried there. No one can access them unless with manual navigation or hashtag search or sharing with others. More importantly, no external user can reach the information or knowledge that is stored there. Similarly, more or fewer restrictions can be seen in messengers like Telegram and WhatsApp.

This is in contrast with the essence of the web. The web is a network of knowledge that connects nodes and makes them reachable and accessible to everyone in the network. But social media and messengers are acting against this logic. They imprison data and never release it for public use; which is reasonable

in business logic but goes against the nature of the web (Falahatpisheh & Khajeheian, 2020).

There is even worse. Let's consider Viber. This messenger was popular in Iran until 2013 that provided a platform for millions of group chats, or better say, the share of knowledge. After the popularity of Telegram, almost every user of Viber migrated to Telegram, and consequently, Viber was abandoned. But what about the huge volume of data that are stored in Viber for years? They are buried there. We have no access to such a large number of information exchanged and left there. We, humans, lost a part of information about our history beneath Viber. Similar losses will happen more and more. With abandoning each single social media platform, the data exchanged and stored in it will be out of access if the owner does not provide the access to the search engines. With the advent of social media increasing exchange of information in them, more data are being prisoned in these platforms. This is a hazard to the web. This is why Khajeheian (2020) calls social platforms blockholes of information. This policy of keeping data inbound and not sharing it with search engines is a peril to the concept of the web and the universal accessibility of information.

2. Method

This article is conceptual. As Gilson and Goldberg (2015) suggest, a conceptual paper "bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking".

To conduct a good conceptual paper, it is needed to select a well-suited research design. Based on Flick (2018: 102), research design explains "the researcher's decision about how to achieve research purposes, how to link theories, questions, and goal with the method and available resources". Jaakkola (2020) argues that conceptual papers are typically built on multiple concepts, literatures, and theories that play different roles. She articulates the elements of a conceptual research design as the followings: choice of theories and concepts used to generate novel insight (equivalent to a theoretical framework in empirical papers); choice of theories and concepts used to generate novel insights (equivalent to Data in empirical research); Perspective and level of analysis (equivalent to a unit of analysis); Key concepts to be analyzed/ explained or used

to analyze/ explain (equivalent to variables in empirical research); Definition of key concepts (equivalent to operationalization, scales, measures). Approach to integrating concepts and quality of argumentation (approach to data analysis).

Due to the nature of this article and its aim to provide a new vision about the evolution of data access in platforms, the present paper is conceptual, not an empirical paper. Among four different types of conceptual papers, including a) theory synthesis, b) theory adaptation, c) typology, and 4) model (Jaakkola, 2020), this paper is a 'theory adaptation' conceptual paper that aims to explain the paradigm change in the data access within the web.

3. Theoretical Framework

Social media platforms have become ubiquitous media in our everyday use, and for almost every kind of information and communication needs we are relying on them, From shopping (Hyun, Thavisay & Lee, 2022; Juju, Arizal & Waldelmi, 2023; Handayani and Sari, 2022; Ebrahimi et al., 2023) to interpersonal communication (García-Gómez, 2022; Gibson, 2022; Kamal, Afandi & Alias, 2022), for exercising and health (Lee, Kim & Joo, 2022; Costa, Esteve-Del-Valle & Hagedoorn, 2022; McColgan and Paradis, 2022) to collect information, and from entertainment (Rothschild, 2011) to self-presentation (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015; Seidman, 2013). Such deep influence of social media in every aspect of today's human lives in the last two decades inspired a rich body of literature about diverse dimensions of social media. This conceptual article is built based on three theories that combined to form the core concept of the text. These theories include the three generations of the Web, the information cost theory, and the media richness theory.

1. Three generations of the Web: In his book, social media, a critical introduction', Christian Fuchs (2017) classified three different generations of the Web to describe the change in communication within their development. He introduced the first generation of the Web (Web 1.0) as a cognition web, implying that the main function of this primitive web technology was to deliver information in one-way communication that websites present to the users. The next generation (Web 2.0) named Connection web, stressing on the ability of this new generation (Social media as we know it) to provide immediate two-way communication

between users, more than one-way information delivery from websites. The early versions of social media such as Yahoo messenger provide live chat and early forums that enable users to communicate immediately and direct were the beginning of Web 2.0 or what we know as social media platforms. Fuchs also presents the third generation (Web 3.0) as a co-creation web or cooperation web, based on the ability of cooperation of different users to work on one project together and to build a product. An example can be seen in a google doc that enables users to work on one specific project from different places and co-create one document together. In this article, this theory is useful because we compare the ease of information access by search engines like Google in Web 1.0 with restricted access to data of social media by the same search engine in Web 2.0 in social media platforms.

2. Information cost theory: Transaction cost economics has always been a key concept in the understanding of markets and information as one of the most critical markets is not exceptional. While the accessibility of information in Information technology products sounds to be guaranteed by search engines in Web 1.0, the social media platforms applications' ability to keep information out of access of search engines increased the cost of access to information. The information cost was slopped down dramatically by Web 1.0 and search engines that were allowed to easily crawl the websites and extract the information to present by one click. But with Web 2.0 and social media applications, the access to data was blocked and the access of search engines to data from social media was restricted and therefore affected the cost of access to information and increased the transaction cost of information. The consequence can be seen in poorer acquired information or more expensive data to access for users and therefore more expensive market transactions.
3. Media richness theory: Schmitz and Fulk (1991) proposed media richness theory based on four basic dimensions, including the ability of two-way communication, the ability to communicate a variety of cues (like verbal, symbolic, nonverbal), the ability to convey a sense of personal presence, and language variety. Based on this theory, the media with more powerful ability in each of the four above dimensions will be a better vehicle for communication and sharing of information. Labafi, Khajeheian & Williams (2018) showed that media richness decreases knowledge-hiding behaviors in organizations and

helps the information circulation within a firm. In this article, it is supposed that the blockage of information within platforms negatively affects the quality of information that users can reach from a search engine, portal, or media that otherwise could present.

4. App or Web browser: What matters?

Mobile apps are becoming more and more popular and in the last decade, they played a critical role in the mobile economy. Almost every user-side mobile software has been distributed as an application that users could easily download from the OS-developer shops like Google Play or iTunes. Presenting software in form of an application eases its use, but there is an important side that is mostly overlooked. While the use of apps instead of a web browser to consume social media like Facebook or Twitter or Instagram sounds similar, the devil has lied here. Apps, make use of IT products, websites, and web services much easier. You click on the app and enjoy its environment and how it serves your application. However, there is an important point within apps: they keep your data out of Google and other search engines' access. Their structure, unless the developers and owners decide otherwise, is to prevent search engines from accessing the data and keep them for their business. I coined the phrase "platforms as blackholes of information" to stress the data to be buried in platforms (Khajeheian, 2020).

One direct effect of such a shift in data processing, which is the central issue of this article, has appeared in search engines' functions. Recently I experienced that Google does not return some of the results that I know they exist. The main reason is that those results have been kept in Instagram, Divar, Messenger, or any other application that I have used before and found something useful. These apps do not share the information with Google or other search engines to be searchable for users. If you want to find some information that is generated or exchanged in an application you have no way to search in every single application solely with its searching tools.

Previously, when you wanted to search for something on the Web, you would easily search it in Google and a fraction of a second would access a list from Pinterest pins, Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, and website content. Today the list is much shorter and usually bound to the websites' contents. While a huge portion

of generated information, especially user-generated content is exchanged within social media platforms, lack of access to such data means missing a great part of human knowledge. Groups in social media, such as Telegram groups, have replaced traditional internet forums, with a difference: Difficulty of search! it is almost impossible to reach the content even in a public group without having an address in Telegram or being linked via a referral. Search engines can not access the content, even when the participants are willing to share their thoughts and invite others with invitation links. Search engines could increase accessibility to the discussion, but the design of telegram prevents the public from accessing the content. This is the reason that Khajeheian (2020) claims that we have entered the age of content burial.

Do all social media platforms restrict access to search engines? They do it on different levels. Due to the contract of content syndication between Facebook and Google in 2015, Facebook provides the most generous access to its content to Google. Although it has ended, however still we can find the content on Facebook by searching on Google. In contrast, a search in google for Instagram content only returns the accounts and the main contact details, that are usable for business contact not for content search. Part of this can be raised due to the social media affordances and design of the given social media. IT product design, especially social media mobile apps, provides us with many things to learn.

5. Affordances

The question is why users accept to use the applications when they experience that their information will not be accessible to others outside of the platform. There are many possible answers, but I want to relate them with affordances, what an IT application enables and restricts its users to do and perform (Bucher and Helmond, 2018).

Let's see how affordances can impact users' actions and behaviors on some platforms.

Instagram: in Iran Instagram is the only accessible corporate social media platform that is publicly available without the use of anti-filter tools. While Facebook and Twitter are not available with regular internet access, Instagram has become the main social media for Iranians to share their ideas and information, although

Instagram is not made for this purpose. Instagram provides no means to search within captions of photos. While many people write their thoughts and ideas in captions of photos, there is no way to search for a specific text and if it is not in the form of a hashtag, you lose the post you are seeking for. The affordance of searchability is very limited in Instagram and it is more reliable for its artificial intelligence to suggest what users are searching. Even in Google, you cannot find any specific piece of information within Instagram unless the account names, hashtags, and some very limited information. Although in the backbone a huge volume of information about users is stored and analyzed for the sake of business, however the search engine access to Instagram information is very poor. Moreover, as I pointed out above, even searching old posts is very restricted in this application and you need to manually search a specific post with your thumb, or remember a hashtag if the account owner has made a hashtag. We can claim that Instagram is not invented for going behind and referring to your memories, but it is built for one-time consumable posts to be seen and then forgotten. It is not surprising that a story, as a post that vaporized after 24 hours find its popularity on Instagram, it is a place for the most recent things not old and aged stuff. In another example, sharing is the main feature of almost every social media platform, and sharing a post of others on the user's wall or retweeting it is a very common feature; However, in Instagram share button is only used for sending a post directly to a number of users, not to make it visible for all your followers in the timeline.

On the other hand, we can look at Facebook, a very open social media platform where its user-generated content can be accessible on google. When you search for a keyword on Google, it is not uncommon to find results from Facebook.com and to direct to the post with one click. At the same time, you may easily go out of Facebook to another page on the web or to another platform with a simple link, which is not possible on Instagram. This ease of cross-platform transfer is something that gives Facebook users a sense of being on the Web, even when they use the Facebook application. As another example, Facebook, encourages us to chronologically go back to history and revisit old posts from a specific period. In Instagram, on the contrary, you are pushed to look ahead and forget the old material due to the lack of a calendar.

Therefore, the design of a platform, including affordances and anti-affordances,

make an important effect on how its users consume the user-generated content and what they expect from the platform. For instance, Facebook provides a timeline on the upper-left side of its web version, that enables users to jump in a specific time and see the posts in that period. For example, you can go to the world cup 2014 and enjoy reading posts in that period, which can be expected to be mostly related to football. This is an affordance that provides users access to their favorable data with a new tool, not only searching a specific word or phrase but passing time in a specific period.

6. The business model of social media

One of the main issues in the decisions of social media platforms about what to offer and what not to offer, is their business model. Reiller and Reiller (2017) introduced the Rocket model as a model of how platforms grow. Their model presented five phases of user attraction, matchmaking, connection, interaction, and optimization. Two phases of attraction and matchmaking are the fundamental phases of this model, both can be strengthened with more access to user-generated data even for non-users of platforms. Finding favorable content via a search engine and leading the platform to consume the full version of the content, including debate, conversation, chat, review, etc., can encourage internet users to join the platform. Also in the matchmaking phase which is a critical phase to match two sides of an interaction, searchability is key, and it is not essentially searchability for users of platforms, but for internet users who are seeking value and find it in a new platform.

7. Discussion

Information processing management is a key activity in the business of social media platforms, as well as almost every business that is related to this industry. Needless to stress, to process the information effectively, the primary requirement is to access the data. Emergence of platforms has been a great opportunity for the digital economy and created a fertile ground for users, brands, and different stakeholders. However, there is a hidden threat lying behind the platforms: the burial of user-generated content and not making information available for public

use. Platforms do this with the use of anti-affordances in their design. For example, Telegram does not provide a strong tool for searching new channels, and usually, users are restricted to the normal search textbox. This prevents them from using the complicated queries to find more content and drives them to use subscribed channels.

There are still hopeful landmarks. The business model of some platforms motivates them to share information. For example, for matchmaking, it suggests users what they are seeking to keep them satisfied. Matchmaking is a key stage in the Rocket model (Reillier and Reillier, 2017) that implies how platforms find and offer the users' seeking value from the bulk of information that exist in the platform. Data is the key, as well as algorithms for comparing the existing data and filtering the data that match the search. To quickly satisfy new users, or update with existing users' recent preferences, platforms need to exchange information. For example, when we sign up for Spotify, if we use Facebook API, we observe that our favorite music is ready to play and is listed without previously playing it on Spotify. This is due to the exchange of information among platforms.

All in all, what we described in this article is a big picture of how platforms may act against the freedom that the web brought to us. While almost everything was findable on the world wide web, now data are prisoners of platforms and by abandoning them, we lose them forever. It is a threat to information management and we may use an important portion of what we as humans create and share.

8. Suggestions

New business models such as the Syndication model are needed. In 2015 syndication contract between Facebook and Google created public access to the UGC on Facebook for any user of google. While today for many social media such as Instagram as a particular instance the business model has changed and syndication may not be interesting enough, new business models that can be adapted with their revenue streams can encourage them to adapt with these new models that provide more public access to search and find data.

Some regulatory solutions may also be needed. New debates on data privacy and protection can cover the regulatory issues about how access to public debate for internet users who are not members of the given social media can be useful

and how it can provide them access to information. The burial of information can be considered as an act of preventing public access to information. Such interpretation can open the doors for new policies that prevent social media platforms from keeping the data unfindable and provide new features for access to user-generated content for global internet users.

Industry structure can also be promising: The acquisition of WhatsApp and Instagram by Facebook was a sign that like other media industries, an oligopoly will be formed in the Corporate social media industry too. When major companies, like Facebook, will own a number of popular social media platforms, a data integration policy and the ability to exchange and transfer user data between platforms is expectable.

9. Limitation

This article is bounded with some limitations. The first one is that it focuses on the searchability of user-generated data that are produced within social media platforms and does not cover the professional content of websites.

The second limitation is that the article only stressed corporate social media, not alternative social media. Alternative social media are growing as a response to corporate social media and have gained popularity for some specific market segments (Fair and Wesslen, 2019; Lin 2016; Fuchs and Sandoval, 2015; Castronovo and Huang, 2012). For example, after U.S presidential elections in 2020, Parler and Gab were raised among Trump voters as political alternative social media to replace Twitter, although their size is too much smaller. Alternative social media are designed based on their target audiences and consider responding to their audience wants to be more important than the size of users. They can be an interesting topic for study in the future. However, Alternative social media are part of the limitations of this study and the findings are not generalizable to them.

The final limitation is the timeframe of the study. Maybe in the next couple of years syndication contracts provide a new type of access to UGC data that are produced and exchanged within social media and the subject will be changed. For this reason, the timeframe of this study, and the search engine access to UGC data in major corporate social media platforms in 2016-2022 is another limitation of this study.

10. Suggestions for Future Research

Researchers in the field of social media are suggested to conduct new research on the following topics:

- ◇ Effect of searchability of user-generated content on the matchmaking phase
- ◇ Strategies for increasing the findability of user-generated content while keeping users' privacy
- ◇ Innovating new business models for social media to share content with search engines
- ◇ New affordances to search and find specific content within user-generated content
- ◇ New generations of search engines, with a focus on deep search abilities, non-text search queries, Artificial intelligence-based search engines, and also niche search engines that are focused on specific areas.

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