

“Sorting Out Social Media Feeds” Excerpt Transcript

Excerpt from [April 1, 2016](#) episode of *Science Friday*.

<p>IRA FLATOW</p>	<p>This is Science Friday. I'm Ira Flatow. This week Instagram announced their proposed change to its photo feed. The photo sharing app is going to ditch the chronological ordering of photos, you know, send them as they come in and they're going to turn to an algorithmic filter.</p> <p>So what is an algorithmic filter? Why the outcry? How are posts being sorted across platforms? How does this determine what we see online? Those are the questions we're going to try to get to the answers with Will Oremus, senior technology writer at Slate here in New York, Hilary Mason, founder and CEO of Fast Forward Labs, also in New York. Good to see you both again.</p>
<p>HILARY MASON</p>	<p>Great to see you too.</p>
<p>WILL OREMUS</p>	<p>Thanks for having us.</p>
<p>FLATOW</p>	<p>You're gritting your teeth almost about this. What's going on here? What's the difference? Why do this?</p>
<p>OREMUS</p>	<p>Every time people hear about their favorite social media service changing how it shows them the posts in their feed, they get so, so upset. I mean, it shows you, doesn't it, how personally we take this, and how important it is to us really. Whether it's Facebook or Instagram.</p>
<p>FLATOW</p>	<p>Yeah.</p>
<p>OREMUS</p>	<p>Twitter had a similar backlash recently when it announced that it would start using some algorithmic filtering in its feed. But, you know the funny thing is that, as much as we hate the idea of this, the massive success of Facebook, which is really the sort of prime example of a social media feed that is ordered by a complex algorithm, shows us that it works.</p>
<p>FLATOW</p>	<p>Hilary, what is this term, algorithm, mean. How does that show up differently than what's happening now?</p>
<p>MASON</p>	<p>So an algorithm is really just a recipe. In this case, it's a mathematical way of processing the data. They're looking at the things that cause you to engage more, to like photos, to spend more time looking at them. They're using that to train a system that will predict which photos in your feed you're going to like the most, and then they're going to show you that set of photos rather than just the chronological set of photos you wouldn't have seen otherwise.</p>

FLATOW	Will, is this all about money? I mean, everything in this game is getting more clicks, or advertising, things like that.
OREMUS	Yeah, it is and it isn't all about money. a company like Facebook, they're looking at the long game. And, so, yes, they care about making money. They think that sorting your feed according to how relevant each post might be to you, helps them to maximize revenue in various ways, but most importantly, what they're always looking at is, does it keep you happy with Facebook? And they're going to want to know the same thing about Instagram.
FLATOW	About 300,000 signatures on a petition sounds like to me, Hillary, like unhappy. At this point.
MASON	So it's particularly interesting because the tension here, I think, is not so much that people are resistant to algorithms. These are similar to the algorithms they already use to target ads at you, for example, on all of these platforms and we don't hear people really complaining about that every day. What's different here, though, is that this algorithm is now mediating a social action, so it's sitting between me and you and our friendship. And it's deciding, sort of, what part of that friendship I'm going to see and you're going to see and I think that's where the tension comes from. It's not from the mathematics. It's from the social interruption
FLATOW	We took a poll of our Twitter followers and with the first 2,000 people who voted, we got them in and we found that 92% prefer a chronological timeline, only 8% want an algorithmic filter feed. Not surprising.
MASON	It's not that surprising. Again, because people want to have a sense of control over what they see in their social network and I think one thing we've lost over here is that the algorithm is not transparent, it is, by definition, a black box and if they told us what was going on, we'd exploit it. So they can't do that. And we can worry about what biases the creators of that algorithm, the people doing the future engineering might have. Think about what if, you know, Facebook machine learning engineer really likes dogs and really hates cats and that gets built into the algorithm. Is that a world we're happy with? It's very unlikely, but still these are questions that are reasonable to ask because we don't know what's happening under the hood.
FLATOW	Hillary, how predictive can these algorithms become in the future?

<p>MASON</p>	<p>So one of the really common misconceptions about this sort of machine learning is that it can perfectly model your individual behavior as a unique human being into the future and that's really not the case. These things tend to be quite accurate at the population level, or when doing an aggregate analysis, but that doesn't mean that it can say that you specifically are going to engage, just that you may be more likely because you're part of this population. And so this is really not something you need to worry about in terms of being able to say that precisely this time of day you're going to click on that photo of a puppy or a baby, but rather that it may choose to bias the things that you see by what people like you actually do and how they behave.</p>
<p>OREMUS</p>	<p>I just want to point out, I mean, a chronological feed, there's still an algorithm there.</p>
<p>MASON</p>	<p>That is an algorithm.</p>
<p>OREMUS</p>	<p>It's an algorithm that is sorting all the possible tweets from the people you follow. It's only sorting them on one criterion, which is time. And the drawback to doing it just by time is, this is what Instagram said when it announced this change that has caused such a backlash, they said, look, you're missing, on average, 70% of the posts in your feed. Now we can't change the fact that we're going to miss 70% of the posts, but what if we could come up with a way to make sure that the 30% you are seeing are the ones you care about more. What if it isn't just the most recent 30% that you want to see. What if there are some others that might be more important to you.</p>
<p>FLATOW</p>	<p>Will Oremus, senior technology writer at Slate. Hilary Mason, founder And CEO of Fast Forward Labs. Thanks for taking time to be with us today.</p>
<p>OREMUS</p>	<p>Thanks, Ira.</p>
<p>MASON</p>	<p>Thank you.</p>