

Facebook does the wrong thing for the right reason

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Recently I listened to a debate on the [radio show Q](#), “Is the Internet making us smarter or stupider?” Lots of great stuff I’m still chewing on, but one thing caught my attention.

One of the panelists talked about the problem of **recency**, which is a bias toward the most timely information. We tend to value the most recent inputs more highly than older information, regardless of whether the new information is more important—and whether it’s even correct.

There are a lot of problems with recency, but many of our social media tools and programs thrive on it. The panelists talked a lot about how Reddit tried to identify the Boston Marathon bomber and ended up getting it wrong. One panelist suggested a system by which users can only “up-vote” a comment once an hour, to try and slow down the flurry of information that comes in faster than it can be checked.

I’ve been complaining for days about Facebook’s changes to its newsfeed. Rather than displaying the most recent updates, it will re-display an old status update, provided there are recent comments on it. Which means that a post from 20 hours ago shows up again, even though a) I have already seen it and b) I didn’t comment or follow the post to begin with.

It occurs to me that Facebook might be trying to offset the recency effect. Perhaps they reason that a post that’s still being commented on days later needs to be seen: there’s still energy there; a conversation continues to take place. Granted, the execution needs some serious tweaking—at the very least, there should be a “seen it and done with it” button—but it’s a decent impulse on their part, not to automatically prioritize the most recent thing as the most noteworthy thing.

Where do you see recency at work in our digital culture, and what are its advantages and disadvantages?

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