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Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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What we're thinking about

How to govern the world's largest social media platforms.

This week, Meta, Facebook's parent company, [reached a landmark settlement with the U.S. Justice Department](#). The company had faced a lawsuit alleging that its ad-targeting tools allowed for discrimination based on "race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status and national origin" when users posted advertisements for housing — a violation of the Fair Housing Act (FHA). In 2016, [ProPublica found](#) that a landlord could use Facebook to explicitly exclude Black or Jewish people, for example.

The problem is more difficult to solve than it might initially appear. Even if users can't discriminate using these obvious categories, [research has found](#) that Facebook has allowed for biased targeting through "Lookalike" and "Special Ad" tools. These programs use algorithms to serve ads to people based on their similarities to others, which means identifiers like someone's location could be used as a proxy for other characteristics.

Although the lawsuit is focused on housing, Jinyan Zang of the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit think tank, [noted](#) that these tools are also "a significant threat to the public interest" because they "can be used to disseminate targeted misinformation and controversial political messages to vulnerable demographic groups."

All to say: The settlement shines a light on a major, unsolved problem centered around how your personal data can be exploited by major social media platforms and the organizations that leverage them. To learn more about where things might go from here, we talked to Justin Hendrix, CEO and editor of [Tech](#)

[Policy Press](#), a nonprofit publication exploring the relationship between technology and democracy. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



What do you think is most important for people to understand about this case?

First, it would appear that for many, many years, Facebook made money enabling people and businesses to run advertisements that violated the Fair Housing Act (FHA), a portion of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

...Second, it's notable that it takes a long time — too much time — to achieve accountability for tech firms. As Julia Angwin, an investigative journalist who brought aspects of Facebook's discriminatory practices to light at The Markup and at ProPublica [put it](#), “you need a village of researchers” and journalists to hold a company like Facebook to account. But while many are keen to see new regulations for tech giants, it's disappointing it can require so much effort by civil society to achieve such accountability. “We can debate endlessly about new laws,” said Angwin, “but if it takes six years to get only the barest enforcement of an existing law, we all have work to do.”

Although the settlement is supposed to result in some kind of oversight, to what extent do you think it's actually possible for a third party to govern a blackbox algorithm that a company like Meta owns and wants to protect?

It's possible to look at what an algorithm does — what are its impacts — even when we cannot see the math itself. Lawmakers in the U.S. are waking up to the need to require such impact assessments.

For instance, earlier this year U.S. Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Representative Yvette Clarke, (D-NY9) introduced the [Algorithmic Accountability Act](#)... I'd also point out that Congress has a couple of bills before it presently, including the [Platform Accountability and Transparency Act](#), [a bi-partisan effort] that would provide researchers with significant access to platform data to study impacts. We need that yesterday!

What else do you think is interesting and relevant about this settlement? What should people be paying attention to in the future?


On some level it should give those concerned with tech accountability some needed hope. While it took years, in this incident you really can see all of the pieces moving together: civil society, academic researchers and journalists shedding light on an injustice; the government taking action to address that


injustice; and, notably, the company responding with the creation of a civil rights group that was able to work with the government to arrive at a settlement that should result in real harm reduction. It's not every day there is a win like this.

Certainly, not everything is peachy when it comes to Facebook; the day after we learned of the settlement, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that the company has taken its eye off the ball on elections, yet again, despite warnings from internal voices and civil rights groups. There is so much more to do — to hold Facebook to account, and the broader tech industry in general.





Other notable headlines from this week


 Two major events in the Web3 universe happened in New York this week: [DAO NYC](#) and [NFT.NYC](#). We loved their emphasis on community — and on that note, we wanted to [share a quote](#) from the technologist [Karl Floersch](#), who spoke at the former: “We need to get to a point as a species where impact is equal to profit, because that means that you can focus on being the most impactful version of yourself, not being the most profitable version of yourself.”

 As we explored in [our interview with Nathan Schneider](#) last week, there's a huge opportunity for the Web3 community to center humanity over finance — even if the cryptocurrency craze seems to obscure this potential from time to time.

 Solana, a major blockchain platform, is [building a smartphone called the Saga](#). It will focus on running decentralized applications and allow users to mint NFTs on the go, among other blockchain-y things. It's an interesting idea: The Saga could make Web3 more accessible by packaging core features — like a crypto wallet — in one convenient ecosystem that fits in your pocket.

 Amazon is [developing a plan to collect voice audio](#) that would grant Alexa the ability to mimic your loved ones after they've passed away. You could, for example, ask a digital simulacrum of your grandmother to read a story to your child. [Do let us know](#) how the feature sits with you.

 Kate Crawford, the noted AI researcher and author of *Atlas of AI*, [tweeted](#) that the news belonged in the “imminent dystopia category.” The tech observer [Julian Sanchez had a different take](#): “What people will actually do is make Alexa sound like Beyoncé, but they'd be in litigation tout de suite if they admitted that's what it's for.”

 DALL•E mini, the art-generating AI [we recently wrote about](#), seems to have a curious fixation on women wearing saris. [As Niles Christopher reported at Rest of World this week](#), when the Brazilian screenwriter Fernando Marés asked the program to create images without any text prompt,

it “generated portraits of brown-skinned women wearing saris, a type of attire common in South Asia” almost every single time. Experts Christopher spoke with don’t know exactly why this is happening, but the answer almost certainly has to do with some kind of bias baked into DALL•E mini’s dataset. If you’re curious about how bias can worm its way into AI, [here’s a good primer](#).

Join us next week for a conversation about the digital public square

Next week, Unfinished and our partners at New_ Public will join together for a conversation about designing online spaces that better serve the public.


As Angelica Quicksey, the new head of the Public Spaces Incubator at New_ Public, described in [a recent newsletter](#): “Designing public-friendly online spaces requires us to investigate why and how people gather online, [re-imagine](#) business models that go beyond ad-supported social media, and [apply what we know](#) about well-designed IRL spaces that facilitate community to the digital sphere.”

We’re all about building a healthier digital ecosystem at Unfinished, and we can’t wait to dig into some of these topics next week. We hope you’ll join us — and maybe even ask some questions of your own.

Listen live to the conversation via Twitter Spaces on **Thursday, June 30, at 12pm ET/9am PT**. [Follow Unfinished on Twitter](#) and tune in then to participate.

Register for Unfinished Live this September

If you’re interested in topics like the ones explored above, we’d like to once again extend an invitation to Unfinished Live, a major event running from September 21 through 24 in New York City *and ~cyberspace~*. We’re welcoming speakers like Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, social technologist Glen Weyl, and *Logic Magazine* creative director Xiaowei R. Wang for conversations about technology, art, ideas, and impact. And we’re also putting together some exciting workshops, live podcast recordings, and interactive art.

If you’re joining us in person, there’s still time to snatch up early bird pricing  — [register here](#).

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

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