The fact that some publishers may cut a deal to run their content directly on Facebook was first met with [anger](http://battellemedia.com/archives/2015/03/a-few-question-for-publishers-contemplating-facebook-as-a-platform.php), then [sadness](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/24/business/media/facebook-may-host-news-sites-content.html?_r=0)and then [acceptance](http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/328789/look-to-the-past-for-lessons-on-the-news-industry-showdown-with-facebook/) (and [here](http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/03/newsonomics-buzzfeed-and-the-new-york-times-play-facebooks-ubiquity-game/)). In short, it ran the normal punditry course.

As is also usual, pundits to date have focused on what a Facebook deal would mean for the New York Times, Buzzfeed, et al—for the corporate media that are cutting the deals now and that may cut such deals in the future. But what impact would a Planet Facebook have on our ability to access to a richly diverse array of news sources?

If Facebook becomes a news platform, it will quickly become the primary news platform. No other software or hardware, on the web or in real life, reaches more people than Facebook. In publishing business speak, Facebook will function as a monopoly distributor. If audiences become accustomed to finding their news on Facebook, it will become very difficult to draw their eyes anywhere else.

The very largest outlets have always benefitted from working with monopoly distributors. CEOs can huddle in a conference room and work out how they can each extract the most money from an audience. Big Media gives the content; Big Distributor gives the market.

Who Wins at Monopoly?

Those of us in the independent press have watched this scene play out before. In the age of print, the U.S. post office had a monopoly on distributing printed magazines to subscribers. Big corporate players [cut a deal with USPS](http://newstandardnews.net/content/index.cfm/items/4741) that gave them a discounted rate if they provided bulk zipcode sorting. Little players who didn’t have the volume to bulk sort were forced to pay more, cutting into their already tiny profits and causing them to further downsize or go out of business.

We saw the same game play out at retail stores. Putting a magazine on “newsstand” was one of the most important marketing tools in the age of print. By the 1990s, however, Barnes & Noble and Borders had a virtual duopoly on retail bookstores. Their buying power led in turn to the collapse of small independent retail distributors, until there were only two distributors left, Ingram and Source Interlink. Until the rise of Web 2.0, independent print magazines often lost money selling on newsstand.

Who wins at Monopoly? Big Media and indpendent media loses.

Will Facebook be Different (Better)?

The emergence of a fully functioning internet changed distribution dynamics. For the first time since penny paper distributors in the 1900s, the web gave the public truly diversified distribution. Granted, the growing monopoly of Google over search has meant that it is easier to find some content than others. However, Google thrives on the long tail, and benefits as a business from ensuring that searchers can find a wide diversity of content online.

The same is not true for Facebook. The Facebook algorithm already censors content. Based on theories about viewers’ preferences, the algorithm weeds out some content and promotes others. Generally, [content that is the most heavily liked](http://www.convinceandconvert.com/social-media-tools/3-ways-to-fight-facebooks-algorithm-and-customize-your-feed/) and shared is the content that is most promoted. Such an algorithm would privilege outlets with larger reach over outlets that might have content more suited to the individual viewer.

Facebook’s business plan is based on its ability to control the content stream. Facebook’s revenue depends on [businesses paying to promote](http://marketrealist.com/2014/01/facebook-revenue-advertising/) their content, either by running an ad next to the Facebook stream or better yet, by purchasing placement in a viewer’s feed. Big Media will be able to cut a deal with Facebook to ensure that their content always obtains prime placement in a user’s content stream. Smaller, independent content providers—well, we’ll be fighting it out with the handyman ads, spending money we don’t have to reach people who don’t even need to be convinced to look for us, but who won’t see us any other way.

As a platform, Facebook will be even worse than the big chain bookstores were. At the chains, the Big Media players got a carousel up front, but you could always find the little guys in the racks in the back. On Facebook, Big Media will be front and center on your feed, but you won’t even see the little guys. They won’t even be in the store.

And This Matters Because?

Because—well, because democracy. A democracy requires a diverse independent news media to flourish. Democracy can only be sustained via vibrant debate among differing points of view. Every person, every community, must be able to have a voice and say their piece in the public square, whether that square is literally a stretch of grass or the the virtual square of the world wide web.

Some would say that social media is that square now. We don’t need the press because every single individual can “share” their every thought online. Not so. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Abigail Adams and many of the other founders of this country understood that in addition to free speech, democracy requires a free press. The press tells us about our selves, providing an outside perspective to the events and ideas of our time. Just as we need a wide diversity of voices to speak, we need a wide diversity of voices to explain, investigate, opine, and analyze what is happening around us.

We need a free press to help us understand “what’s on our minds.” And we won’t have that free press if it is to live under the beck and call of one corporate master.

Next Steps

Working with Facebook is in the interest of Big Media. It’s in the interest of Facebook. But it’s not in the interest of anyone else. The time to stop Facebook from monopolizing news content is now, before audiences become so accustomed to turning to Facebook for news that they won’t go anywhere else.

Readers, viewers, and subscribers to Big Media who also care about independent media must step up and ask the New York Times, Buzzfeed, et al to refuse to cut a content deal with Facebook. Those in the tech world who got into tech because they loved a web where you could find anything need to speak up. And those of us in the independent sector need to speak up as well.

I’m no activist. I don’t know how to run a campaign. But I do know that if we don’t stop Facebook from becoming the primary provider of content online we will lose the essence of our democracy.