

Look away from the trending topics

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Time was when we had a neutral commons where those of us who wanted to say something could say it, try to earn people's attention, and choose whether to give them our own. I'm speaking of course of the internet—a long decade ago, before social media swallowed it whole.

The blogosphere of the aughts wasn't a perfect place; often it was downright horrible. But there was an elegant simplicity to how words got from writer to reader: writers—bad or good, amateur or professional, unfiltered or edited—created a blog that published a feed, and readers bookmarked that blog or subscribed to its feed. We read the people we wanted to read.

A lot of us used Google Reader to do this. This tool for subscribing to feeds was my browser homepage for years. So I enjoyed the latest ode to its sad demise, [by Silvia Killingsworth](#):

Remember the good old days of Google Reader? You could consume web content on your own terms, in your own tab, whose walls you decorated with the favicons of your preferred content providers. Now it's all algorithms and retweets and breaking-news chyrons. Google Reader was launched in 2005, when everything was still okay and BuzzFeed hadn't been founded yet, and it was shut down on July 1, 2013. To my mind, that is the day the Internet died, and what we are experiencing now is purgatory. Make yourself comfortable.

There are other feed readers available, and I still use one here and there. But most of the online-reading public has long since moved on. ([Last week it took an old-school blogger to remind the Twitter hive what an RSS feed actually does.](#)) Instead of choosing what to read, we let big tech companies choose for us. The ads they so smartly target us with make this profitable for them in a way something as content-neutral as a feed reader never was. (When Google killed Reader, it was still trying to get us to ditch Facebook for Google+.) An online world dominated by social media

works pretty well for the companies that own the media.

Does it work for us? That's a complicated question, since social media's reach into our lives is so diverse and so vast. But one thing it does not do at all well is to serve as a neutral commons for information. While Twitter has sometimes tried to stay closer to this ideal than Facebook has, it's just not what either of them is built to do.

By now, plenty of Facebook users know all this. But we don't always act like it. As Facebook's cultural role as an information filter grows, we persist in expecting it to be something it isn't.

Sen. John Thune, chair of the commerce committee, [wants an explanation from Facebook](#) as to the site's [alleged suppression of news articles from conservative sources](#). "If there's any level of subjectivity associated with it," said Thune, "...I think it's important for people to know that."

[There is a tremendous level of subjectivity involved](#), Senator. We already knew that; it's just that we mostly don't seem to care. Facebook is useful and fun, and our friends are on it! Now, we might leave if they did, and they might leave if we did. But they don't, and neither do we.

So most likely we'll all stick around, but let's at least be clear about what it means to get our information—as opposed to just our wisecracks and our baby pictures—from Facebook. If Google Reader was a reader-customizable newsstand, Facebook is the only newspaper in town—one that has no reporters but an infinite store of syndicated content it can lay out on the page for you. You could never read it all, so its editors—[not its readers, however those editors may choose to weigh their considerable data on us](#)—determine what gets seen.

Facebook is, in short, a huge media company run by humans, humans with biases and limitations who—like the editors of big publications and small ones like this one—aren't always going to serve all readers fairly or well. We might not celebrate this reality, but it's hardly cause for shock or outrage or a congressional inquiry.

What it is cause for is some reevaluation of how and how much we all use Facebook. It is not a digital commons, not a neutral infrastructure for experiencing internet. We need to stop letting it tell us what to read.