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## Democracy and Deliberation in the Age of Facebook

In 2016, we witnessed two shocking political decisions in stable democracies: the election of Donald Trump as American president and the United Kingdom's referendum to exit the European Union membership. After the scandal of Cambridge Analytica mining Facebook data to influence the 2016 U.S. elections, a public conversation began to question the role of data use, surveillance practices, and especially of social media companies such as Facebook in shaping democracies. Siva Vaidhyanathan's book, *Antisocial Media. How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (Oxford UP, 2018), paints the larger picture of the logics by which Facebook operates. It encourages readers to understand not only political outcomes such as Brexit and the U.S. elections, but also the erosion of democracy globally (from India to Poland and Hungary) as the result of media logics of audience fragmentation, narrowcasting, and discursive polarization.

Vaidhyanathan explains the Facebook model of information gathering as extensive and non-transparent to users. Facebook traces our interactions with others through comments and location sharing. It maps relations among our photos, videos, ads, and profiles. It integrates that information with what we share on its core services like Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp. And it tracks data on other platforms (e.g. Spotify or Pandora) if users log in with Facebook credentials. What it creates is an impressive record of knowledge that can predict behavior. That information is sold to both commercial advertisers and to political campaigns and parties.

The author takes issue with a business model that allows political parties to address citizens the way companies address consumers: only about what they are interested. While, he explains, political communication has borrowed from private sector practices since at least the 1960s, the non-transparent collection of data that emerged in the 2000s and its normalization by Facebook warrant special attention (162). And that is because the company is "the most pervasive surveillance system in the history of the world" and is the largest global media actor, with two billion subscribers (57, 1). With such power, the commercial practice of segmenting users into precise market groups to be addressed with precise communication has great potential to undermine democracy (25).

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*Antisocial Media* draws attention to at least two discursive conditions of functional democracies: deliberation practices and the availability of public forums to host and cultivate such practices. Vaidhyanathan criticizes Facebook for depriving citizens of the autonomy of judgment needed for deliberation. The company allows political campaigners to drive audiences into “echo chambers” in which only few issues are discussed in ideologically predictable ways. Divergent voices that may complicate a citizen’s understanding are made invisible both through the effort of political advertisers that run “[s]ingle-issue campaigns” where candidates speak only on one or very few issues, and through Facebook’s algorithm that privileges in each person’s feed ideologically-coherent content (164). Such monologism, Vaidhyanathan warns, at minimum limits deliberation and, at its worst, makes audiences vulnerable to misinformation.

If citizens are increasingly deprived of the multiplicity of voices that allows for perspective, afforded by earlier media environments, Vaidhyanathan suggests that it would make even more sense that the media corporations would pick some of the burden of checking the information they allow on their platforms. Yet, quite the opposite is the case. Mark Zuckerberg, as recently as the October 2019 Congressional hearings about his proposed monetary tool, Libra, continues to defend his company’s unwillingness to fact-check political advertisements and take down misinformation for the upcoming 2020 election campaigns. The author criticizes Zuckerberg’s justification—that all voices deserve an outlet and the citizen-consumer decides which to choose—as a naïve expression of a neoliberal ideology of consumer choice. Zuckerberg’s rationale obscures both Facebook’s capacity for influence as “the most powerful political platform in the world” (3). It also masks its financial interest in attracting political campaign dollars that, to unprecedented degree, can intentionally disinform already polarized and ideologically isolated citizens. While Facebook continues to refuse fact checking political advertising, since *Antisocial Media* has been in the press, the company has taken a few tepid steps in curbing hate speech. In spring 2019 it banned right-wing extremists, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Laura Loomer and Joseph Watson on both Facebook and Instagram and pledged to ban “praise, support and representation of white nationalism and white separatism” (Schwartz, 2019; “Standing against Hate,” 2019). These belated steps are as needed as they are imperfect, critics argue: yes, extremist personalities and their organizations are banned, but comments by individuals praising them are not taken down (Lorenz, 2019). Vaidhyanathan has argued that Facebook is too big and complex of a company to be reformed at the edges, and he might see the current back and forth between regulators and the company over hate speech as missing the many other ways in which Facebook damages public discourse.

Indeed, what I appreciate the most about Vaidhyanathan’s book is the comprehensive account of the complex ways in which Facebook shapes the media environment. It is an account that goes beyond a business model that encourages audience segmentation, and even beyond hate speech as the only kind of speech to be worried about. Thus, the author is quick to note that the platform’s visual style is engineered to curtail multivocality. The Facebook webpage normalizes the single-issue, declarative, visual and approval or reaction-seeking style of communication in a few ways. By nesting comments only under individual posts, Facebook discourages participants from engaging with multiple interlocutors (8). By rewarding the most liked, shared, or commented posts, most of them visual, Facebook “ensures that the most inflammatory material will travel the farthest and the fastest” (6). The aesthetics of Facebook, thus, socializes users away from conversations with multiple interlocutors and into everyday declarations of clear ideological affiliation.

Furthermore, to compete for attention (and the same advertising dollars) traditional news organizations now routinely make editorial choices that fulfill the Facebook aesthetics of circulation, unintentionally driving readership even further into their ideological niches. Instead of generating and editing content with an eye at public service and newsworthiness, Vaidhyathan suggests, traditional news media now also title, format, and pursue the stories that have the best chance of gathering reactions on Facebook (9). Such adaptation of old news media to social media further socializes readers into the choppy, short communication—a “click, a share, a comment, a like” that mark approval and indignation (165)—which enhances the habits of using communication to mark belonging rather than foster deliberation. Vaidhyathan’s proposition that Americans were readied for Trump’s declarative, choppy, emotional, volatile and verbally underdeveloped style of communication by Facebook’s normalization of that genre of discourse seems only logical (174).

While Vaidhyathan condemns the model of narrowcasting for the prospects of a deliberative democracy, he is careful to note that, while it atrophies deliberation, it does not lead to political apathy. On the contrary, the new media model facilitates political mobilization precisely because it allows politicians and activists to reach their proverbial choirs with those messages most likely to move them to action. The author’s examples of mobilization run from charitable fundraising campaigns to protestors around the world between 2007 and 2017.

Such mobilization is possible not only because social media is precise in directing issues of interest towards those audiences more likely to respond, but because it makes mobilization fun, engaging, and socially rewarding. Thus, chapter one, “The Pleasure Machine,” discusses posting behavior on Facebook as a performance of identity and social belonging: what we post, defend, question, and criticize in our daily or weekly interventions online, he argues, “solidifies membership in a group” and “demonstrate group loyalty.” (50) Such demonstration of group belonging and identity is engaging: whether expressed as anxiety, anger, or resentment, “Facebook attracts us, hooks us, encourages us to declare our affiliations, divides us, and tracks every single interaction along the way.” (51) If Vaidhyathan concedes some value to the political engagement fostered by Facebook—for instance, in coalescing anti-authoritarian movements—he is nevertheless consistently skeptical of its democratic promises. His analysis of the quick swings in power in Egypt, for example, from the hopeful demonstrations that overthrew Mubarak in 2011 to the current authoritarian dictatorship that got installed once again, makes a convincing case for both the value of Facebook in mobilizing anti-authoritarian protestors into a movement, and for its inability to sustain democracy in the absence of an established public sphere and its practices of communication and deliberation.

While I agree with the author’s general evaluation that Facebook shapes deliberative habits of political communication, holding too much power for how little responsibility it assumes for shaping the public sphere, I am not yet convinced that Facebook holds a privileged place among the drivers of de-contextualization and misinformation, in our current media ecology. Nor that breaking up Facebook and using anti-trust regulation are sufficient, if they may be necessary, correctives of the current discursive polarization (25). At least in the American context, Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj’s have extensively documented the rhetorical style which Facebook displays as dominant for the past thirty or so years. A profitable polarizing “rhetoric of outrage,” has become dominant across media platforms in the U.S., as a consequence of the deregulation of media industries during the Reagan administration and the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Such changes placed news media under the pressures of profitability as opposed to the public service model. In search for differentiation,

audiences, and advertising venue, outrage rhetoric has attracted audiences, politicians, and activists alike and has been turning high profits by ideologically moving away from the center. The outrage genre displays the main faults that Vaidhyanathan has skillfully outlined for Facebook communication: provoking emotional responses through the use of overgeneralization, misleading or inaccurate information; sacrificing both rationality and deliberation, to the performance of verbal competition; being ideologically selective by ignoring or trivializing issues that are ideologically irrelevant to audiences, while prioritizing sure hits for greatest emotional impact with select audiences; engaging audiences and leaving them “feeling validated and virtuous for having participated;” and encouraging echo chambers (Berry and Sobieraj 7-8).

Understanding Facebook communication as a subcategory of outrage media prompts us to see the current crisis of public trust in the U.S. as more entrenched and pervasive, and Facebook as the latest comer to the industries of outrage, capitalizing on this genre just like television, radio, and blogs have done so far. Such perspective on the last three decades of media ecology nudges us to wonder whether anti-trust and pro-transparency legislation to regulate Silicone Valley companies such as Facebook are sufficient, as much as they are necessary, in changing the current discursive climate. It suggests that a richer industry-rhetorical picture may be needed. One that considers how the synergy between “the outrage industry,” outrage rhetoric, a relatively recent business model of data mining and selling, and waves of deregulation of media industries started in the 1980s have created the perfect storm whose effects we are now living.

The biggest missed opportunity in *Antisocial Media* is an explicit and systematic treatment of the relation between democracy and deliberation. While the author is chiefly preoccupied with how fast and demonstrative performances of affiliation are replacing the slower processes of thinking and communicating required for democratic life, he is yet to articulate how good public deliberation looks like. The book is haunted by the specter of the Habermasian model of the ideal public sphere and its valorization of rational, fact-based, impartial and deliberative discourse. As an institution that actively disables the process of deliberation, Facebook embodies Habermas’s idea of “distorted communication” (Habermas, 1970). And while *Antisocial Media* comprehensively catalogues the sins of Facebook as a ‘bad’ object, the mourned lost object is never fully and systematically named. If the tone of the book is marked by a nostalgic longing for a lost media ecology that predates Facebook, what does that model look like? Where, historically, is it to be found, if not in the past few decades already marked by an outrage industry? And if it is the kind of a Habermasian ideal speech situation, how would Vaidhyanathan square that preference with criticism leveraged against Habermas’s model, namely, that it devalues and excludes the voices of the poor, non-whites, the foreign-born and women who may not follow its norms (e.g. Fraser, 1990). A discussion of the tensions between Habermas and his critics would have opened a rich conversation that recognizes both the power that social media gives marginal actors, and the ways in which certain forms of marginality (for instance, that of disaffected right-wing groups) has been most recently co-opted by the powerful conservative political machine and made dominant. An engagement with rhetorical scholarship might have also led Vaidhyanathan to draw a more nuanced distinction between fast thinking that can be easily manipulated, of the kind Facebook encourages, and its democratic opposite: not the “stop and think” mantra of Hannah Arendt (202), but practical wisdom as the capacity for informed and context-sensitive judgment that

rhetoricians since Isocrates and Aristotle have studied, a capacity cultivated by exposure to common issues (Schwarze, 1999; Schwartz and Sharpe, 2011).

My disciplinary wishes for a more explicit and systematic treatment of the relation between democracy and deliberation comes from an eagerness to assign *Antisocial Media* in Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism courses. Vaidhyanathan's book is a compelling read, one that current undergraduate students, especially the iGeneration (born between 1995–2012) steeped into current practices of media consumption, would do well to study (Twenge, 2018). Vaidhyanathan's prose is convincing and maps in detail the increasing dangers Silicon Valley companies present to our democracies and communication habits.

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