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The Dark Side of F. Reflections on Siva Vaidhyanathan's *Antisocial Media. How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*

In media and communication studies, as in all humanities and social sciences, the research perspective, the paradigm adopted, and sometimes even ideology play a key role when answering the questions of what one wants to explore, and how to go about it. In thinking about the object of research in this way, science sometimes resembles art. If two people are requested to describe, photograph, paint or film an apple sitting placed on a table, two completely different images will most likely be rendered. The skills of the artists (researchers), their experiences, cultural roots, the context in which their work has originated, and their ways of thinking about the world differ.

Being aware of this inescapable phenomenon not only triggers reflections on the lack of objectivity, but also makes it utterly impossible to achieve. Therefore, researchers are expected either to get as close to objectivity as possible (losing their 'own perspective,' cultural accretions, beliefs, subjective choices, and so on - to the largest conceivable extent) or to honestly determine the perspective they are taking to shed a Popperian light on the object of their study (Popper, 2002, p. 402).

The author of the book *Antisocial Media. How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, Siva Vaidhyanathan, chooses the latter path and does not hide in the slightest that he has taken a critical perspective, addressing seven 'machines' which exert a negative impact on our functioning in the world of the media.¹ In this way, he makes reference to the intellectual traditions of his master – Neil Postman, as well as to broader critical currents with a long tradition in Europe, pursued by Jürgen Habermas first and foremost. Yet, instead of continuing these traditions by examining cultural phenomena, television or infotainment, Vaidhyanathan takes a step forward by focusing on social media or, more precisely, on Facebook, as the most influential, largest and symbolic website which, without a shadow of a doubt, has an enormous impact on current society and politics. Although his attempt is not the first one (as evidenced by an earlier, interesting book by José Marichal, *Facebook Democracy. The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life*), it is one of the first comprehensive analyses of this type 'after Trump,' which is important in the context of the rapidly changing world of politics and the media.

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The book takes a natural and necessary direction on the path to the modernization of the critical tradition, choosing Facebook, which has provided numerous reasons to be criticized by the author of this book, and by others. After a relatively long stage of cognitive optimism which prevailed in the discourse on the internet and democracy,² this relationship has begun to be looked at with increasing caution and doubt (Loader & Mercea, 2011). With Brexit, Trump and several other ‘phenomena’ around the world, we have become disillusioned about the ability of the internet in its modern incarnation to help us rebuild a badly bruised democracy (Tucker et al., 2017). The book systematically identifies these illusions, accusing Facebook of exerting an adverse impact on social discussion, redistribution of goods, social relations and values, access to reliable information and so on. Using the concept of myth (cf. Barthes), the author argues that Facebook covertly constructs our vision of reality the same way television did in the past.

If Facebook and the stories told about it are a kind of myth, then the book demythologizes them. While often doing so in a brutal way, it nevertheless remains within the limits of what a researcher is entitled to do, looking at reality in a specific, individualized way. However, the question should be asked whether or not this demythologization is also a certain narrative framework which is not significantly different from the myth itself in terms of logic and schema. After all, myth builds a specific image of reality, a story that becomes the hard-to-take-off spectacles which give reality a specific color, like in Carpenter’s famous film. Some name it a myth, others – an ideology, which we can only be saved from by taking these spectacles off. The book by Vaidhyanathan seems to be intended to remove our eyeglasses. But what if it merely offers to replace one pair of glasses with another?

Books that try to cover such a large area of our lives as our social media presence, by their very nature must choose a kind of narrative – a story about the world seen through the eyes of the author and taking into account his experiences, masters, opinions, cultural roots and so on, which have all molded him. This story can also take one of the interpretative perspectives which we often use when examining works of literature, art or film. The story can also be used as a tool to analyze reality, including our relations with the media. The story of Facebook could have taken various forms, such as psychoanalytical (Facebook as an embodiment of superego?), feminist (a tool of symbolic dominance?), postcolonial (a new form of subordinating the broadly understood South?), technological determinism (as the driving force of social change?), and so on.

The book is a combination of many forms, which can be considered its strength - or its weakness. In this way, it demythologizes Facebook in a comprehensive and multidimensional way, exposing its successive adverse impacts on how society and democracy operate. On the one hand, it could be argued that the author should have discussed even more problems (indicated by chapter titles). I myself have an idea for a few more stories that could take the shape of ecocriticism (Facebook’s impact on increased demand for energy and the resulting environmental pollution), critical pedagogy (developing bad habits in young people by using Facebook in teaching, or failing to effectively point to the adverse outcomes of using Facebook, among other things), or artistic criticism (a unified interface killing the creativity of online graphic designers and creative individuality on the Web). However, even the criticism that the author does develop in his seven chapters generate two serious threats, namely locating the object of criticism in the wrong place (in the book, this is Facebook), and the danger of falling into dogmatism (exchanging one pair of eyeglasses for another).

Although the former problem is reminiscent of ‘a chicken and egg situation,’ it may apply to the diagnosis of the problem as identified in the title *How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy?* I admit that, at the beginning, the examples and mechanisms discussed by the author are clear and convincing. Beyond doubt, Facebook and other social networks often are the ‘evil characters’ during live broadcasts of terrorist attacks, playing the role of a transmission belt for spreading untruths, emotionalizing public life, and so on. While the author writes that one cannot resist the impression that he believes that the new media system that has been developing in recent years requires changes, among which Vaidhyanathan recommends, for instance, introducing regulations similar to those in Europe, or creating something like an anti-Facebook ‘international.’³ All these diagnoses and remedies to the problem concerned are interesting and worth considering (although one could doubt the effectiveness and actual outcomes of EU actions). But what if one reversed Vaidhyanathan’s terms and asked: ‘how democracy disconnects us and undermines Facebook’ (or more broadly: media as such)?

[t]his book does not argue that Facebook is the source of these troubles. Facebook is, however, the most pervasive and powerful catalyst of information pollution and destructive nonsense (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 27)

The direction liberal democracy has taken over recent decades is as worrying today as the condition of the media, which to a large extent have obviously had an adverse impact on democracy (although one can easily find studies based on meta-data, whose authors, although with many caveats, essentially point to the positive impact of social media on civic participation; see e.g. Boulianne, 2015). What I mean here is democracy in a broad sense; not only as the influence of the public on the shape of political reality (the will of the people), but also as people being prepared for conscious participation (education), or the active implementation of the five ‘sacred principles’ of democracy, namely sovereignty of the nation, respect for minority rights, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and political pluralism. Let us consider, for example, the issues of civic and media education, the more so as young people are probably the most frequently studied and described group in terms of the hypothetically positive impact of social media on political involvement and participation (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014).

In many countries (including Poland, which I am most familiar with in this respect), this issue is completely marginalized. Given the number of hours we spend using the media every day, communication education should be included in the core curriculum worldwide. During such classes, young people could gain knowledge and develop key skills in distinguishing between truth and falsehood, and learn about the algorithms of information selection in social media, phenomena characteristic of modern media (e.g. the filter bubble mentioned in the book), personal data security, and so on. In most countries worldwide this is not done at a satisfactory level.

One could optimistically assume that if societies were more aware of certain processes and phenomena, the role of the media in democracy would change. Such cases can actually be found. For example, Iceland, which values civic knowledge, has been able to constructively use social media to deliberate on a new constitution (Landmore, 2017).⁴ Maybe it is the weakness of society and state institutions that empowers the media and gives them authority, allowing them to set the rules in fields where the state is absent. Vaidhyanathan presents this phenomenon very well in the example of Facebook charity collections, whereby the state is

denied the privilege of decision-making as to who needs what resources to improve the world (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 77). This is just one example of where the state has failed and given in to private media companies, allowing them to shape their relations with the public as autonomous entities. The main, natural and primary task of these companies is to generate profit, with secondary concern for public interests. The question can be asked then of whether Facebook has really changed our democracy, or rather the weakness of this democracy has allowed private services to 'squeeze in' wherever tedious and procedure-governed democratic processes have proven to be inefficient. Would the regulations proposed by the author suffice or should more radical solutions be considered with academic seriousness, such as the nationalization of certain media companies, a solution which is increasingly often proposed by journalists and experts (see Srnicek, 2017; Raddi, 2018)? If we agree that in certain areas only the state can ensure guarantees (security, money printing, and in some countries education, utilities or transport), does not this sensitive and crucial area also cover services that have a real impact on the outcome of democratic elections and thus on all other areas of political life?

The second problem is posed by the danger of dogmatism in Vaidhyanathan's critique, which is easy to fall into when the narrative is strongly focused on a single evil character. This is a bit like accusing the inventor of the knife of contributing to manslaughter. Could a knife be constructed so as not to hurt people? It probably could, but its basic function would likely be lost, and it would no longer be a knife.

Facebook is only a tool, designed by its creators, but also used every day by other people. In this respect, the author's reflections on the numerous statements of Mark Zuckerberg are interesting. This brings part of the narrative down to stories about human ambitions, interests, and greed, often dispelling the illusions about mythical 'good intentions.' It should be borne in mind, however, that the people and groups described in the book are also mere cogs in a machine, and products of certain cultural and political phenomena. Facebook can also be understood as a business, an embodiment of the American Dream, and an emanation of ultimate American individualism, the Z generation, slackers, scenesters, hipsters and other present-day -ers, but also of new political movements referring to the tradition of direct democracy and the propagators of refuting political correctness. These and many other phenomena, to a greater or lesser extent associated with American culture, form the canon of the mutual impact of an imperfect media system on democracy, as well as of a democracy in crisis that has made its mark on the media.

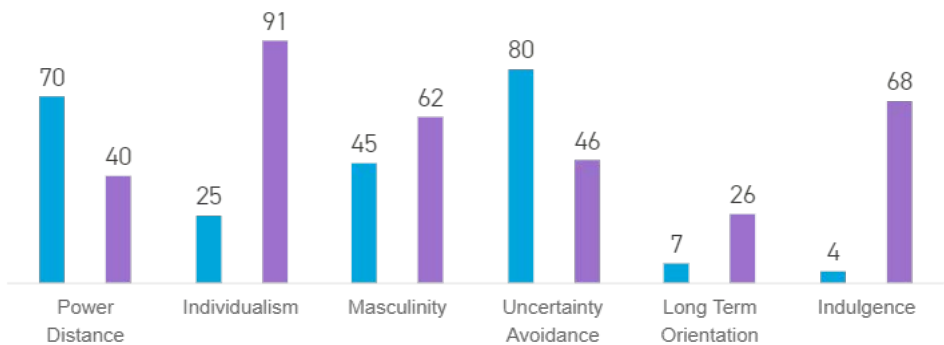
This last theme addressed in the book will be the final, and one of the most interesting topics that I would like to take up in my discussion. Setting the framework of his narrative, the author writes the following:

While Neil (Postman – J.J.) focused his analyses on the mainstream culture of the United States and its dominant Western intellectual tradition, often deploying a universalizing tone, I prefer to view media ecosystems with an awareness of specific conditions around the world (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 27).

This is an important declaration, further followed by numerous examples of Facebook's impact on society and politics, including in the Philippines, India, Arab countries, and the United Kingdom. This paints an extremely wide picture of the various interdependencies, expansion, interests and business tactics employed by the Silicon Valley giant. However, attention should be given to certain risks associated with a story told in this way. However non-insightful this is, it has to be said that, despite its narrative of goals, ambitions and con-

necting people on a global level, Facebook is a 100-per cent product of American culture and it is impossible to talk about it in any other way. Created by an American, originally for American students, it seems to be designed to ‘service’ American democracy, strongly personalized and associated with entertainment, where the borders between what is political and what is ludic and commercial are blurred (the final outcome of which is Donald Trump). Facebook’s personalized interface, its timeline logical structure, its focus on low-context communication, and even the long-term, non-alternative and symbolic ‘like’ button that reflects American optimism, are just a few examples showing that this is the case. These elements make taking a global, intercultural perspective on the Facebook story extremely difficult. It is the more difficult the more immersed the one who tells the story is in a specific cultural area, including the political context. An example of that is what the author repeatedly mentions, namely the lack of deliberative and collective benefits for democracy from using Facebook as a modern agora. It is true that Facebook does not do this well. However, the reason does not necessarily have to be Facebook itself, but the cultural nature of society. After all, the parameters affecting the functioning of democratic institutions in the cultures of Egypt and the United States, mentioned in the book, are so radically different (see Figure 1) that using Facebook may be a matter of not only its morphology, but also its applications in specific cultural conditions or political contexts (Wolfsfeld, Segev, Sheaffer, 2013).

Figure 1. Comparison of Egyptian (blue) and American (purple) cultural dimensions by Geert Hofstede.



Source: Culture Compass™, <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/egypt,the-usa/>.

In conclusion, the book by Vaidhyanathan is an excellent, critical study of our contemporary media reality and its impact on how societies operate. Its unquestionable value is the enumeration of dangers through a coherent, consistent narrative based on the threats posed by social media in the world. It is therefore a serious warning for those who are still trying to look away from the problems generated by Facebook, despite the obvious evidence of its dysfunctions. Taking such a wide view was an extremely ambitious, but also provocative task because it encourages readers to answer questions themselves about the successive ‘machines’ resulting from their own personal experiences, cultural contexts and insights while using Facebook. It should be remembered, however, that this is only one narrative, a good story, which requires the researcher who wants to get a more comprehensive picture of the problem to reach for other stories told differently.

Notes

¹ Many organisations dealing with this issue draw up such lists based on the most pressing problems in the modern practice of using the media. See, e.g. Six Key Issues by Deb, Donohue, Glaisyer, 2017.

² Social media and their specific nature have aroused an extensive range of social and political expectations, and have been seen as facilitators of pro-democratic, civil and deliberative activities. They frequently refer to the issues related to the democratizing function of the Web. This manifested itself for the first time in the 1990s, when the commercialized Internet was hoped to break the crisis of democracy based on the tabloidizing influence of traditional media (Wilhelm, 1999); in the early 21st century, when the new ‘social opening’ and enthusiasm of the new millennium aroused hopes for greater civil independence (Baciak, 2006); and after 2011, when the Arab Spring and the protests against ACTA demonstrated the mobilizing power of the Web (Lakomy, 2013).

³ Many researchers of this issue and organizations deal with these matters, see e.g. Carr & Aaron, 2019.

⁴ Although it was not eventually adopted due to the political power balance, it was proved that Facebook can be used constructively to achieve collective goals – a joint draft constitution had been worked out.

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