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Responses to the reviews

It is a great honor to have my work examined with such depth and sophistication. Professors Jakubowski, Haliliuc, and Buturoiu have each offered the book generous praise, patient criticisms, and have offered both me and the larger field much advice for future work that can either correct for my book's weaknesses or extend my book's strengths.

I had hoped that this book would demythologize Facebook. I wanted readers to understand that Facebook is a complex collection of technologies, working mostly in concert, that all try to hook users on the experience. The prime motivation for Facebook is to get people to use Facebook. Ultimately, the goal is for Facebook to be the prime — perhaps default — medium for human communication around the world. By making Facebook essential to daily life in the early 21st century, Mark Zuckerberg hopes to manage significant portions of human activity for his own benefit. The trick, as I demonstrate in the book, is that Zuckerberg does not see a distinction between the interests of Facebook, the interests of 2.5 billion users, and the interests of Zuckerberg himself. Zuckerberg is an ideologue and an idealist.

Since early 2018, when reports of Facebook's promiscuous data-sharing habits and its potential influence on political movements around the globe broke out from the work of social media scholars into mainstream conversations, Zuckerberg has suffered from a kind of cognitive dissonance. He still wants to believe that what is good for Facebook is good for the world — and vice-versa. But the evidence is mounting that Facebook is just another company, only bigger and more pervasive than any such company we have ever seen in history.

Professors Jakubowski, Haliliuc, and Buturoiu encountered Antisocial Media at a moment when many of the issues the book explores are daily news. They were deft enough to focus on the deeper goals and themes of the book, avoiding getting distracted by the latest breaking news about Facebook and its effects on democracy. For that I am grateful.

Professor Alina Haliliuc immediately grasped the core theme of Antisocial Media: Facebook is perhaps the most powerful tool we have ever had for political and social motivation. But Facebook is not only terrible at hosting deliberation, its dynamic pressures on journalism has a corrosive effect on the quality of the public sphere and thus severely undermines quality deliberation. Democratic republics need both motivation and deliberation. Facebook amplifies the former and undermines the latter.

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Professor Haliliuc takes issue with the book's claim that Facebook plays a distinct and uniquely powerful role in the erosion of the public sphere, citing earlier studies of right-wing indignation and extremism pumped up through radio and television. Equating or even assuming prominence for other media forms merely because they have existed for longer misses the point, however, that they are now intimately connected to Facebook. The rhetorical style of right-wing extremists in the United States certainly honed itself via talk radio and cable news (Berry & Sobieraj, 2004), but it finds its loudest voice on Facebook now. Facebook reaches more than 220 Americans — almost 70 percent of the population. That's only exceeded by the 300 million citizens of India who use Facebook (already about one third of the adult population of India and rising fast). Citing studies of American extremist media to claim that Facebook's influence might not be as powerful as its reach implies ignores the fact that Fox News and Rush Limbaugh do not circulate in India, Brazil, Sri Lanka, or the Philippines. These places have suffered more acute assaults on civic culture and democratic norms than the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia have. Rupert Murdoch wishes he had that kind of influence in his three home countries.

Beyond the fact that the phenomena the book tracks reach far beyond the American data, we should remember that these media systems are no longer separate. Facebook chooses for us which specific examples of audio, video, and text we encounter in our News Feeds. It's no coincidence that the top source of news in Facebook News Feeds is Fox News. Fox News structures its content to work well with Facebook's algorithmic bias toward sparking strong emotions. There is a constant feedback loop between extremist content from legacy media forms and Facebook. It's never either/or. It's always both.

Professor Haliliuc is correct and astute when she faults the book for being “haunted by the specter of the Habermasian model of the ideal public sphere and its valorization of rational, fact-based, impartial and deliberative discourse.” The book offers no rich description of what a good deliberative platform would look like. It offers no sense of how we might build the norms, practices, laws, and technologies that would foster healthy deliberation. Professor Haliliuc's advice that I study rhetoric with more depth and care is certainly on point. I can only plead that I finished the book with those notions uncooked and I knew it. They remain uncooked even today, although I have been rather obsessed with this unsatisfying conclusion to Antisocial Media. Toward that end, I have been engaging in research projects to fill out a healthy, just, and diverse vision of a deliberative public sphere that gets beyond Habermasian nostalgia. I have devoted the work toward my next book to this very question. So I must thank Professor Haliliuc for certifying my desire to do better this time and for helping to guide my explorations toward the next project.

Dr. Raluca Buturoiu offers a full and generous analysis of Antisocial Media. Professor Buturoiu, requesting some glimmer of hope or a strategy forward, suggests that the diagnoses of the problems as outlined in the book could be used to generate and promote a media education agenda. Here is the problem. By the time I finished writing the book I had lost all hope. I had imagined various personal and policy responses, run scenarios through my mind, and found them all wanting. Almost all of them I found interesting, potentially helpful, perhaps even necessary, but far from sufficient.

I settled on two major areas of policy reform that I thought offered some sort of relief from the pernicious effects of Facebook. One was competition policy, or, as we call it in the United States, antitrust law. (Botta & Wiedemann, 2019) The second was data protection, or as we call it in the United States, privacy law (Ni Loideain, 2019). The European Union has

been deploying its much more expansive and aggressive competition law against Facebook and Google for almost a decade, with little or no long-term improvement in the behavior of those companies. They are just too big and too rich for meager fines to make a difference. Data protection offers a bit more hope. Since the General Data Protection Regulation went into effect in the European Union in May 2019 we have seen companies struggle to adjust to it, with the larger, richer companies managing more successfully. But we have not seen the full effects of the law, nor are we likely to for years until courts hear specific challenges to the practices of data gathering and use by companies like Facebook. It's too early to tell whether such comprehensive data protection in one large market like the European Union will alter the power structures that enable Facebook to exercise so much influence over us.

Professor Buturoiu suggests that media literacy offers one way forward. I recoil at this suggestion. First, it underestimates both the scale of the problem (how does one run media literacy training in more than 100 languages in countries that have no interest in improving their political or media culture?). Media literacy puts the responsibility for cleaning up the media ecosystem on the victims rather than the polluters. It also puts even more pressure on educators, who are already overburdened with high expectations and underfunded in their efforts to get basic education to billions. We have not even cracked basic literacy, let alone media literacy. Efforts to promote media literacy also misread the nature of the problem. People share outlandish, false, enraging content because it makes them feel good. It helps them declare their identity and affiliation. It reinforces views that comfort them. Education can't address that problem. In addition, media education is focused on the young. Young people are not the problem. Old people are. They are too far beyond any kind of education.

Professor Jakub Jakubowski asks the most insightful and powerful question of the text: "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?" Jakubowski warns that the book risks both "locating the object of criticism in the wrong place" (i.e. Facebook) and "falling into dogmatism (exchanging one pair of eyeglasses for another)."

Toward that end Professor Jakubowski suggests putting the critical lenses and the burden of reform on us — the users — rather than Facebook. He cites the healthy democratic political culture of Iceland, where citizens routinely receive substantial civic knowledge, and where citizens deployed social media to forge a progressive new constitution approved by voters in 2012. He suggests that the maladies we see in teetering democracies like Poland and the United States might be better understood as failures of civic culture or media education rather than failures of the media themselves, Facebook included.

"Facebook is only a tool," Jakubowski writes. Here Professor Jakubowski lurches dangerously close to a position of technological neutrality, or a full-throated endorsement of a theory of "social construction of technology," (Humphreys) one in which the specific affordances and powers of a technology play little or no role in how societies change. Tools are just tools, and people decide how and when to use them. The familiar chant of the National Rifle Association comes to mind: "Guns don't kill people. People kill people." Certainly Professor Jakubowski does not suggest such a simplistic position on the role of Facebook. But his approach does put the burden and blame on the victims — the citizens of democracies that have seen their media systems overrun with propaganda internal and external, and a consequent erosion of civic trust. That an Iceland, Denmark, Taiwan, or Estonia seems immune to the fate that has overwhelmed Poland, Hungary, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, the Philippines,

Italy, Ukraine and even the United States of America should not lead us to believe that these successful states will be either successful forever or role models for others.

To get a full and sufficient grasp of how a technological system influences the world, as I explain in *Antisocial Media*, is to avoid positioning technologies and societies (or “culture”) as two distinct and separate spheres, either one acting with greater force (“determining”) or the other. Technologies are socio-cultural and social and cultural forces are almost always technologically mediated. Given that technologies do bear the marks of specific design choices, and that designers, engineers, and the companies and governments that support them exert power within societies, it’s imperative that we recognize those power differences and identify the particular affordances that important technologies display. This theory of technology often is called “social shaping” (Williams & Edge, 1996).

Facebook tends toward certain results by design. It amplifies some kinds of content over others — specifically content that has been shown to generate significant “engagement” (clicks, shares, “likes,” and comments). That means content that Facebook can predict (by mining millions of previous posts and measuring reactions to them) what sorts of content is likely to generate strong emotions. Emotions move people to engage, to act. Emotions can be affirming, like the warm feeling of seeing a photo of a cute puppy. Emotions can be destructive, like calls to mass violence, genocide, or harassment of political enemies. The affordances of Facebook make some sorts of politics easier than others. Politics of fear, hatred, resentment, and indignation play very well on Facebook (Bucher, 2018).

That said, Professor Jakubowski concludes his comments with a strong and proper criticism of *Antisocial Media*, one for which I can only confess guilt. “After all,” he writes, “the parameters affecting the functioning of democratic institutions in the cultures of Egypt and the United States, ... are so radically different ... that using Facebook may be a matter of not only its morphology, but also its applications in specific cultural conditions or political contexts.” I could not agree more. I hope the book does not lead readers to a universalist conclusion. Facebook works differently in Turkey and Greece, in Russia and Estonia, and in Indonesia and Australia. Specifics matter. Contexts matter. History matters.

But Facebook matters as well. How and to what extent it matters differs across the globe. And it’s up to future researchers to assess and compare the difference Facebook makes in one country or society compared to another. But with 2.5 billion people using more than 100 languages regularly engaging with a single corporate media system with such defined affordances, it’s safe to say that Facebook matters in similar ways everywhere — just not to the same extent anywhere.

The sum of all the issues raised in these three important essays comes to one clear conclusion: *Antisocial Media* is neither the first nor the last statement on the influence of Facebook in the world and the world on Facebook. Much more research must emerge. The public needs a more sophisticated view of how media technologies work in concert with social needs and desires (Baym, 2016). Surveillance is just beginning to generate the attention it deserves. And polemics will get us nowhere. I hope that *Antisocial Media* and these comments can inspire a next wave of Facebook scholarship that can correct for my book’s excesses, errors, and omissions. As far as the gloomy outlook with which the book concludes, I hope I am spectacularly wrong about the fate of democracy in a world so determined to view itself through Facebook.

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