

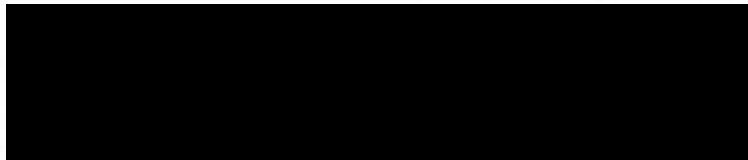
SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DECLINE OF TRUTH

Stewart M. Schweinfurth

TC 660H
Plan II Honors Program
The University of Texas at Austin

December 12, 2019

George S. Christian, Ph.D.
Department of English
Supervising Professor



Wendy E. Wagner, J.D.
School of Law
Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Author: Stewart Schweinfurth

Title: Social Media and the Decline of Truth

Supervising Professors: George S. Christian, Wendy E. Wagner

In media history, there exists a perpetual cycle in which humanity's innovation of communication technology shapes world culture and political climate, eventually resulting in humanity's delayed response to these changes. Using this framework, this paper addresses the recent innovations of the social media era and the spread of online communication in regards to their impact on behavioral conditioning, democracy, and generally how people process information. The discussion takes a nuanced stance between two popular ways of imagining social media's effect on the world: arguing for both an oppressive, authoritarian reality, likened to Orwell's *1984*, and a senseless, over-stimulated one, likened to Huxley's *Brave New World*.

First, the paper addresses themes in human reasoning that have contributed to the success of social media as well as the ways social media exploits and reinforces certain aspects of human behavior. The discussion then turns to the politicization of social media and the ways society has used current media technology to shape political climates and additionally frame news, both internationally and domestically. Lastly, the paper addresses the deviance of social media platforms into problematic uses, including the empowerment of authoritarian regimes and the incitement of polarizing, extremist sentiments.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction.....	5
1. How to Frame Media.....	7
2. Destabilization.....	31
3. Authoritarianism and Social Media	52
Conclusion.....	62
Works Cited.....	66
Biography.....	69

Acknowledgements

To my parents, an insurmountable expanse of gratitude is due. Furthermore, I am deeply grateful for Professor Christian's guidance throughout the entirety of my college experience. He has helped reveal to me not only how to write, but how to learn, how to perceive the world, and how to live relentlessly. I want to thank Professor Wagner for her unceasing ability to ask the right questions, to provide constructive, positive feedback, and balance projects with enthusiasm. In addition, thank you to Sydney for the most coveted comfort during times like these: company. And to Katherine Murphy and Daniel for their pursuits of support that often veer into deep nooks of distraction. Thank you, Tessa, for your exceptional ability to roost and to Katherine Anne Doan for experiencing the anxieties of this project on my behalf. To all my friends and family, you convince me daily that, "when life reaches out with a moment like this, it's a sin if you don't reach back."

- Matthew Quick, *The Silver Linings Playbook* (2008)

Introduction

Notions of truth elusively slip through humanity's fingers, only to fall once more in the palm below, creating an eternal dialectic in which people continually change how to discover, disseminate, and utilize truth. The pursuit of reality and the desire to control narratives of history drive humanity forward into this struggle to determine what words the world utters and who will hear them. Though ironic, the most significant strides in this dialectic often provoke the most fleeting perceptions of truth. To understand truth, one must understand how society communicates. Through the respective ways a public engages in discourse and news reaches an audience—every medium of communication gives a new dimension of life to the messages that it bears. As history shifts from oral to written, and from written to digital, there occurs not only changes in how people create and disseminate information, but how they process and think about the information, how it affects people emotionally and compels them beyond the literal meaning of words. As global cultures shift and the pendulum of history swings in its new trajectory, the world often focuses on what people are saying and for what purpose but rarely asks, “how are they saying it?” In answering this question, the world witnesses how truth does not lie outside of humanity, as something to grasp, but rather originates from within humanity itself as a product of culture and innovation—not the purpose of culture and innovation. By discussing the modern shift of communication onto digital mediums, the internet, and social media platforms, this paper addresses how the world has again changed communication, thus shaping truth itself, and how humanity has failed to adequately respond.

In short, social media has altered the ways in which the world communicates, destroying notions of truth, civil discourse, and democracy in the process. The term “social media” represents platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram by which users share, post, and

receive content, building an online community and social network that warrants providing personal information, feedback, and communication. Additionally, this includes websites such as YouTube which allow users to share content openly to the website's entire, mass audience and platforms such as GroupMe which provide group messaging services but with the added feature of reacting to or liking specific messages. Across the spectrum of online communication platforms, several common features persist: the emphasis of visual, succinct bits of information, encouraged social affiliation, and the digital trail of user participation. While the innovation of communicating online intended to connect the world and positively impact global opportunities, these mediums have skewed the way society effectively communicates and processes information.

Social media exploits the flaws in human reasoning that prioritize fast-paced, surface-level content over a deep understanding of issues and largely reduces all shared content to provocative, visual fragments of a story. These platforms encourage users to disregard the contexts, nuances, and compromises of an issue, instead choosing to support an easily identifiable, polarizing stance and base its credibility on premises of social affiliation: what person shared the content and does their online network like and affirm them. As the world opens up to the dangers of addictive, sensational mediums of digital communication, there exists rampant opportunities for companies, governments, movements, and campaigns to take advantage of these platforms and their users. As summarized by media historian and author Siva Vaidhyanathan;

“If you wanted to build a machine that would distribute propaganda to millions of people, distract them from important issues, energize hatred and bigotry, erode social trust, undermine journalism, foster doubts about science, and engage in massive surveillance

all at once, you would make something a lot like Facebook.” (Vaidhyathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. [New York: Oxford University Press: 2018], 19.)

However, the flaws and difficulties that have accompanied the creation, success, and evolution of social media present a more complex web of media history and culture.

This paper intends to provide a context of media theory and human reasoning that explains why mediums of communication regularly and heavily impact humanity, but also reveals how social media supersedes any prior media innovation and presents alarmingly unparalleled changes in human history. By discussing the exploitation of humanity, the disruption of geopolitical climates, the empowerment of authoritarianism, and the encouragement of informational chaos, the following exposition seeks to clarify a central reality: that while global, public discourse continues to occur more frequently via social media platforms, the world loses its grasp on truth and stability. Amidst a sea of case studies, media research projects, and discussions of dystopian possibilities, the subject often takes a narrow angle and corners the argument towards a focus on either social media’s encouragement of oppression or invocation of mindlessness. Instead, this paper takes a nuanced stance apart from authors such as Siva Vaidhyathan and Neil Postman, arguing for the interdependent relationship between oppression and desensitization that exists within social media. Additionally, this discussion draws on a wide range of research and case studies, originally conducted by authors largely for the purpose of niche hypotheses, to tangibly connect numerous aspects of the technology’s harmful nature to the roots of human reasoning and culture. In staking dichotomous, middle-ground and broadening the contributions of individual research, this paper

creates a broader vision—one that quickly and effectively presents the gravity of humanity’s current situation.

1. How to Frame Media

Dystopia Dichotomy and Media Theory

Before launching into detailed discussion of today’s social media platforms, one must first consider the theories and mindsets with which scholars have analyzed and approached the evolution of media and technology in order to better contextualize the modern, media environment. The conversation often revolves around a central dichotomy—between the totalitarian future as portrayed in George Orwell’s novel *1984* and the deadened, senseless one in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Society seems to turn over in its oxymoronic state, switching from a belief that current media, surveillance, regulation, and government interference will soon result in the rise of an ultimate, authoritarian oppression to the belief that media will invite over-stimulation and instant gratification to prey on a numbed, apathetic world. However, while many attribute their theories and visions of media to the fulfillment of one specific future, ultimately there exists a seemingly paradoxical, but frightening middle ground in which the world experiences both threats of brutal totalitarianism and self-sedated, dispassionate existence—brought by the rise of social media.

In the book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman addresses television entertainment in the 1990’s, supporting the postulation of Huxley’s future over that of Orwell’s. He argues that the rise of entertainment media has changed the way people engage information and communication, reducing society’s ability to navigate discourse and instead expect shallow,

convenient sound-bites of information.¹ The true danger lies not within brutality itself, but the ability to ignore brutality and the inability to address problems—the difference between burning books and losing the desire to read them entirely.² With each innovative mode of communication—from the printing press to the internet—one must not only consider the changes in what information is now communicated, but how information is communicated and its long-term, cultural effects on civil engagement and public discourse. “Every technology has a philosophy which is given expression in how the technology makes people use their minds, in what it makes us do with our bodies, in how it codifies the world, in which of our senses it amplifies, in which of our emotional and intellectual tendencies it disregards.”³

This view of media, driving culture forward and shaping human modes of pedagogy and communication, represents the concept of technological determinism. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan—a major proponent of this theory—famously summarized the philosophy behind it by coining the phrase “the medium is the message.” Theorists such as Postman and McLuhan establish a simple line of causation in which technology and innovation force society to adjust and adapt, creating social change, influencing the human mind, and shaping society in the process.⁴ In many ways, this framework largely applies to the discussion of social media, as Facebook and other current platforms transform both the medium and message of modern

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness*. (London: Methuen: 2007).

² Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 23.

³ Neil Postman, *Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change* (Denver, CO: March 28: 1998) 1.

⁴ Thomas Hauer, “Education, Technological Determinism And New Media” in *INTED2017 Proceedings*, (2017), 1.

communication, creating new models of global audiences, communities, relationships, news sources, and movements. Conversation about social media needs to address how these platforms have leapt beyond the boundaries of any previous media or communication outlet and catalyzed historical, psychological and social change, leaving society to play catch up and pick up the pieces in their wake.

The other, but subtler and more dangerous aspect of deterministic technology lies in what Postman deems the “mythical” quality of media. In this technological context, the word “myth” refers to the state in which an innovation tends to become integrated so deeply over time until considered “God-given, as if they were a part of the natural order of things.”⁵ As in the case of televisions becoming central focal points in a home, cars becoming an expected mode of transportation, or even the use of written language, technologies often lose any element of surprise or fascination and become an unchallenged, unquestioned part of reality. Postman’s theory thus frames social media in a precarious position, largely normalized and expected, but not yet unchallenged to the extent of the television or car. This represents a critical moment for a society teetering between dystopian realities—the opportunity to begin breaking habits, to question and regulate a media system before it becomes dangerously unalterable as a fixture in human history. However, the world does not exist solely as a technologically determined plot-line, fated to chase and conform to innovation until reaching an unrecognizably skewed future. Technological determinism merely falls on one end of a spectrum, sitting across from the element of human causality which accounts for the complete picture, providing another dichotomy with which to frame conversation of media.

Media and Human Behavior

⁵ Postman, *Five Things*, 4-5.

While technology remains a force in cultural evolution, culture and the human mind forge technology and account for the dogged pursuit of innovation to begin with, blurring these elements into a symbiotic relationship: essentially between the human mind and the influence of its own thoughts. Therefore, one must consider why social media is so successful, what aspects of human nature have brought about its creation, and how does humanity itself fuel social media's influence over society. The effectiveness of social media platforms largely boils down to its addictive and visual nature: the entire system subsists on an endless cycle of images and videos, likes and comments, emotional reactions, and shallow information. Like opening the refrigerator time-after-time, knowing the contents have not changed significantly, one hopes endlessly for something to fulfill their appetite. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, GroupMe, and Instagram beg its users to post content, comment on other posts, or tag people in content and then continually hover, revisiting the sites to see how their audience has received and responded to the message. Facebook lowers the transactional costs of maintaining relationships and users' attention, synthesizing friends into easily digestible displays of photos and using algorithms to curate media feeds of content based on relevance, number of reactions, and structured interactions.⁶ This ultimately reduces human interaction with social media to a state of behavior modification, best explained by the psychologist B. F. Skinner's theory of "operant conditioning."

Operant conditioning refers to the process of learning by receiving punishments and rewards in response to behavior. Skinner created an experiment, known as a "Skinner Box," in which a rat was placed inside a box that contained a lever, the lever when activated would cause

⁶ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 33.

a pellet of food to drop into the container, and Skinner would change the degree at which the lever correlated to the dropping of a pellet.⁷ The experiment began by reaffirming the theory that behavior followed by positive consequences is likely to be repeated while behavior followed by negative consequences is less likely to be repeated, but broadened further to test a new aspect of operant conditioning. Skinner tested the theory that behavior followed by reinforcement tends to be repeated, while behavior that is not followed by any reinforcement, positive or negative, tends to die out. Using the lever and food pellets, Skinner tested different schedules of reinforcement—varying the intervals at which the pull of the lever would go with or without a pellet. The results reveal a spectrum between what Skinner refers to as “continuous reinforcement” in which every lever pull is met with the immediate delivery of a pellet and “variable ratio reinforcement” in which the behavior of lever pulling is reinforced with a pellet drop after an unpredictable number of attempts. For continuous reinforcement, the rat can reliably trust in the line of causation and thus the rate at which it pulls the lever is slow, only accounting for the exact moments it feels hungry, and the rate at which the rat will stop pulling the lever if it stops yielding a reward of pellets is fast, due to the reliability of its correlation. However, in the case of variable ratio reinforcement, the rate at which the rat pulls the lever is almost constant, regardless of whether it needs to eat or not, to make sure it eventually gets food and the rate at which the rat will stop pulling the lever in response to no pellets is incredibly slow due to hope in eventual reward. The trick to social media’s success lies in variable ratio reinforcement—the secret to trapping consumers in a habitual cycle of opening applications parallels the method Skinner and even casinos use to keep their subjects pulling the lever.

⁷ B.F. Skinner, *The Behavior of Organisms: an Experimental Analysis*, (Acton, MA: Copley Pub. Group: 1991).

Author and internet activist, Cory Doctorow, presents the first strong correlation between Facebook and Skinner’s box, stating that the platform creates a system in which further engagement and disclosure of information represents the lever while social response and community represents the pellet.⁸ Each user builds a box of friends and family, photo albums, biographical information, interests, and posts, pulling a lever that may yield comments, likes, and engagement in return or nothing at all. Every day, new posts go unpredictably viral, incurring thousands of emotional reactions and comments, while the majority of content falls into a void that garners few responses and little social recognition. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram condition their users to over-share and constantly perform cursory checks, not knowing when a reward will come next, but remaining hopeful enough to keep them from stopping. “The more you embroider the account of your life, the more you disclose about your personal life, the more reinforcement—intermittent reinforcement—you get about your life,” giving companies like Facebook the information they crave and receiving sensationalized, shallow content in return.⁹ Society’s way of communicating and receiving information has begun to resemble the addictive, habit-forming activity of eating junk food—the endless consumption of small, savory bites without ever achieving fulfillment until you have lost track of consumption. In his book *Anti-Social Media*, Siva Vaidhyanathan argues that;

“Facebook engages us like a bag of chips. It offers frequent, low-level pleasures. It rarely engages our critical faculties with the sort of depth that demands conscious articulation of the experience. We might turn to Facebook in a moment of boredom and look up an hour

⁸ Cory Doctorow, “TedxObserver.” Filmed in March 2011 in UK. TED Video.

⁹ Doctorow, TedxObserver.

later, wondering where that hour went and why we spent it on an experience so unremarkable yet not unpleasant.”¹⁰

In the same way that food chemists design junk food to provide a savory taste and light density so that its consumers continue to eat without ever feeling satiated, Facebook creates an environment that is pleasurable without fully satisfying a need—deemed “vanishing caloric density” by the food industry.¹¹ Social media successfully combines the most addictive, behavior-shaping qualities found in gambling and potato chip consumption, curating an experience that resembles the mindlessly pleasurable reality of *Brave New World*.

The second trick to social media lies in its visual nature, in the way platforms communicate heavily through the use of photos, videos, GIFs, and the phenomenon of memes. Photography and videography, as described by Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, have revolutionized how information is communicated and how people perceive the world. Photos have the ability to suspend moments out of time and out of context, representing a reality believed to be more credible and objectively truthful than other mediums while not actually delivering the plot or narrative of the captured experience.¹² Wielding an emphasis of perceived objectivity and emotional argument, as opposed to an explanatory one, photographs monopolize peoples’ attention, sensationalize content, and draw attention away from the full context—all things achieved by social media platforms as well. It makes sense then that the most popular platforms consist of rolling pages and news feeds filled with photographs and

¹⁰ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 34.

¹¹ Michael Moss, “The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/magazine/the-extraordinary-science-of-junk-food.html>

¹² Susan Sontag, *Susan Sontag on Photography*. (London: Allen Lane: 1978), 67.

thumbnails of videos and links. In order to draw relevance and engagement, articles, links, videos, events, memories, stories, and documented moments in peoples' lives all focus on providing an emphasized photo with a secondary title or caption, transforming every piece of information into a billboard-like advertisement.

Social media provides a steady stream of decontextualized information in the form of photographs and images, sparking reaction, emotions, and the desire to comment or share, but rarely a deep understanding or discussion of the actual content.¹³ These platforms even manage to take the already distant nature of photographs and further remove meaning through sheer desensitization, exposing a global audience to endless depictions of tragedy, beauty, violence, entertainment, and historical moments until little significance remains intact. Additionally, Sontag argues that photography transitioned from art into a practice of amusement, providing “a way of certifying experience... a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.”¹⁴ Photography has become a way not only to perceive reality, but to invent it entirely—to relive the past, reframe the present, and express participation in something and the experience of life. People like Sontag have identified the nature of photography and its cultural impact decades before the invention of social media, but these platforms have now revolutionized the medium. The partnership between addictive news feeds and blurring streams of images results in the pinnacle of decontextualized, ‘potato chip quality’ information that convinces people they know of and participated in countless things while the depth of this knowledge and experience remains shallow.

The Social-Political Agenda

¹³ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 43.

¹⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

Following the concepts that communication drives cultural change primarily through the medium rather than message and that social media actively shapes human behavior, society must consider the way these platforms have also altered peoples' perceived attribution of priority and importance to information—changing what matters about the message by changing how it is delivered. Social media has made information social, adding an aspect of affiliation and community to every piece of content. The effects of making information social drastically shifts the way an audience perceives it, drawing priority away from actual understanding of content, as social media finds its key to success in this curated manipulation. In *Anti-Social Media*, Vaidhyathan discusses Aristotle's philosophy on friendship and his view of humanity's core, political nature, stating that while social media originates from a place for fostering relationships and interactions—it inevitably leads to political, tribal performances of affiliation.¹⁵ Believing humans to be “political animals,” Aristotle claimed friendship to be political as well. Humanity's desire to establish deep friendships, exert power, socialize and collaborate ultimately creates a system in which justice, affiliation, and politics emerge and thus the creation of society, or “the polis.”¹⁶ When discussing social media and the ways people utilize its platforms, it becomes necessary to understand the political nature of communication and how this form of media aggressively fosters it in every message, post, and interaction. “We share content regardless of its truth value or its educational value because of what it says about each of us,” focusing primarily on the ways content expresses membership and affiliation in order to generate social capital and a coordinated self-image.¹⁷ Scrolling through the comments on articles, links, viral posts, or even

¹⁵ Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, 49.

¹⁶ Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, 49.

¹⁷ Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, 50.

peoples' individual content, anyone can see how communication on these platforms becomes more polarized and less informative as social media misguidedly panders to users' political natures and amplifies a message's aspects of social affiliation rather than information.

The results of social media's blunder into humanity's political agenda effect both the way users post content and the way users receive content, specifically regarding news, its perceived validity, and how sharing news on social media changes that perception. In 2016, the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted the Media Insight Project in which they created an experiment, testing for the effect sources have on the perception of content. The experiment surveyed a sample of nearly 1,500 people, presenting each person with the same news article but labeled as either a reputable news source or an unknown one and then shared by varying public figures—half of the people receiving a source they verified as trusted prior to the survey and the other half receiving a source deemed distrusted. Ultimately, the experiment found that “whether readers trust the sharer, indeed, matters more than who produces the article or even whether the article is produced by a real news organization or a fictional one.”¹⁸ For the majority of surveyors, the study found that the sharer of the article heavily impacted various aspects of trust in most cases (fig. 1).

¹⁸ David Sterrett, Dan Malato, Jennifer Benz, Liz Kantor, Trevor Tompson, Tom Rosenstiel, Jeff Sonderman, and Kevin Loker, “Who Shared It?: Deciding What News to Trust on Social Media.” (*Digital Journalism*7, no. 6: 2019), 783–801.

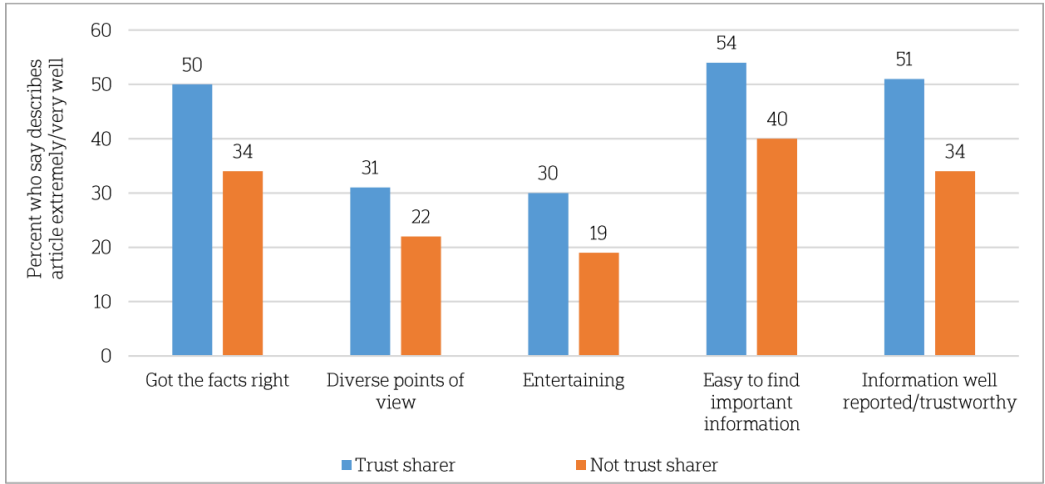


Fig. 1

More importantly, the cases in which the sharer and news source most differed—a trusted sharer and unknown source or a distrusted sharer and reputable source—follow this trend as well, strongly reinforcing the conclusion that who shares content often outweighs who wrote it in impacting viewer perceptions.

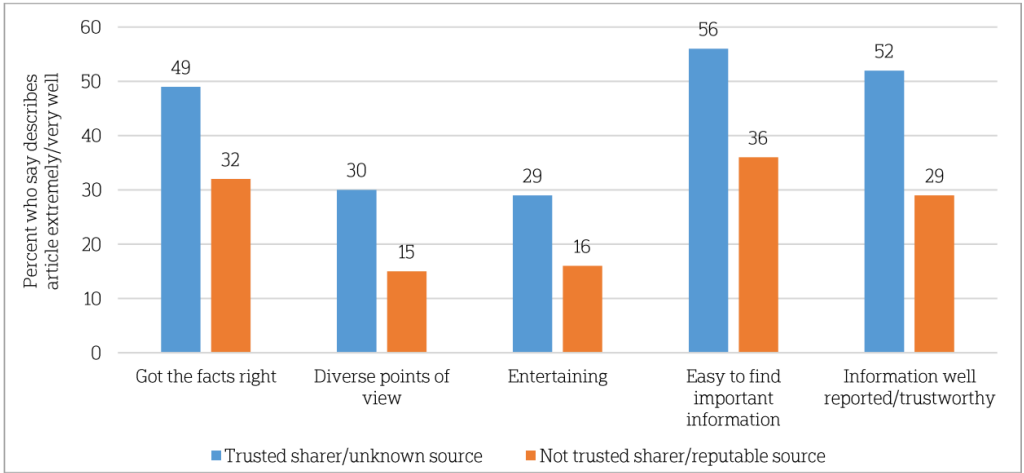


Fig. 2

Not only does the account responsible for sharing the information affect how others perceive its qualities of validity, trustworthiness, and fairness, but the sharer also influences the way an audience engages the content.

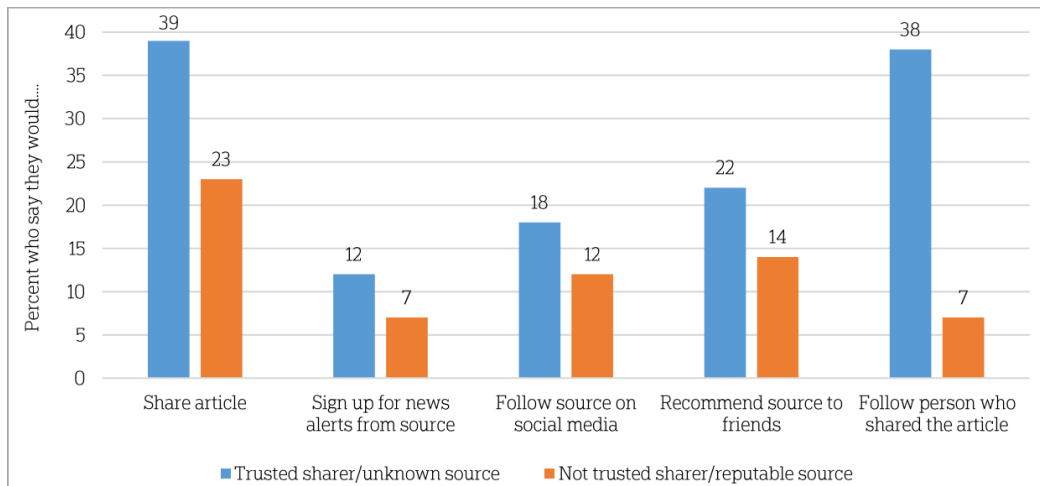


Fig. 3

The data from the survey confirms the dominant prioritization of social-political affiliation on social media platforms over actual information and objectivity of content. Just as social media capitalizes on the sensationalism and emotional engagement of photography, it also preys on similar aspects found in social affiliation. With a system founded on likes, comments, followers, subscribers, and social authority, these platforms successfully decontextualize and reframe content within relational boundaries—as if agreeing or disagreeing with a post implies subscription or denial of the person sharing it and the political and social groups they associate with. However, social media not only encourages the socialization of content, but actively curates the way in which it occurs, entrenching society further into a dysfunctional discourse characterized by polarization and self-serving bias.

This process occurs through social media’s dogged pursuit of user attention and habitual use, as platforms—most notably Facebook and Google—reward content that appeals to a person’s social affiliations while gradually filtering out other content. Author and technology activist, Eli Pariser, refers to this phenomenon as the “filter bubble.” As users reward certain sites, groups, friends, and links by sharing, liking, or commenting on them, Facebook uses a

scoring system that evaluates the content a person engages most with and works to provide them with more, while narrowing down on information that garners less user engagement.¹⁹ As a result, peoples' news feeds tend to homogenized over time, showing less about people and organizations that a person disagrees with and providing more content from sources that a person supports and agrees with. Google also uses an algorithmically altered system when producing search results and advertisements based on 57 signals of information about the user—from what computer they are using, to where they are sitting, to what browser they used to open Google.²⁰ Social media already encourages tribal, membership-oriented behavior and communication merely in the design of its medium, so the additional, hidden concept of creating a filter bubble for its users dramatically heightens the problems encountered in internet discourse and modern, public conversation. According to Pariser, the problem also continues to spread through other sources as news sites such as the Washington post, retail-based sites like Amazon, and other media-consumption sites such as Netflix all utilize algorithmic gatekeeping to condense peoples' entire online experiences into bubbles of relevant, easily digestible information.²¹ As society approaches a world that increasingly panders to each person's biases, attempting to provide people with only what they want to see and hear, people see less of what they actually need and less diversity of thought. The result is a divided society, unable to properly engage in discussion or argument as social media reduces communication to the performative support of sensationalized content that aligns with a user's already-held beliefs and ideologies.

¹⁹ Eli Pariser. "Beware Online 'Filter Bubbles,'" (TED: 2011).

²⁰ Pariser, "Filter Bubbles."

²¹ Pariser, "Filter Bubbles."

The Panopticon

Beyond discussion of these realities of social media and human nature—that place society on track to fulfilling Huxley’s prediction of an over-stimulated, deadened existence in *Brave New World*—the socialization and over-sharing of information not only cheapens users’ lives, but also exposes them to unparalleled surveillance. While Huxley may have closely predicted the tendencies of consumers in a pleasure-driven world, the rise of the internet and social media sites leaves equal opportunity for the fulfillment of an oppressive, Orwellian future as well. The shift between these two dystopian models equates to the shift in how social media is utilized—shifting from the user-driven, information-sharing aspects of early stages to the institutional-driven, information-using aspects of later stages.

“Social networks and media indicate and incorporate the shift to interpersonal, horizontal and mutual communication and offer the ability to increase information aggregation.

Being “subjects in communication” users make their data available to others, thus becoming “objects of information” and therefore “objects of surveillance.”²²

What began as *Brave New World* threatens to become *1984* as these platforms encourage users to share visibly and construct an entire, digital identity that publicly and algorithmically leaves behind traces, concerning a person’s interests, affiliations, opinions, beliefs, habits, family, and friends. While people usually communicate online with a specific, narrower audience in mind, “social media augment their users’ visibility, not only to their chosen “friends” but also to other

²² Manuela Farinosi, “Deconstructing Bentham’s Panopticon: The New Metaphors of Surveillance in the Web 2.0 Environment,” *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 9, no. 1 (2011): 62–76.

persons (as “friends” of “friends”), agencies, and institutions.”²³ From the examples of people losing their jobs, public figures rising and falling, and the implementation of government and institution agendas all because of posts, photos, tweets, videos, and links—society is beginning to notice the most pervasive surveillance system ever created.

From Jeremy Bentham’s original designs for a revolutionary prison and Michael Foucault’s later development of the idea in *Discipline and Punish*, the concept of the “Panopticon” helps address the nature and full extent of social media’s threatening surveillance capabilities. The architectural plan of the Panopticon comprises a circular building—with fully visible, prisoner cells lining the circumference—while a surveillance tower resides in the middle, using various means such as shutters to prevent visibility of the watchmen inside. The conceptual effect of the Panopticon, as described by Foucault, induces “in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” as the structural design establishes a sustaining power relation in which the inmate is always “a subject of information, never a subject of communication.”²⁴ This model of self-sustaining, surveillance-based power rests on two core properties: “the internalization of discipline in the mind of the observed and the voluntary subordination of individual to the observer’s potential gaze.”²⁵ By combining the inmates’ vulnerability of unceasing exposure and constant ability to see the entity responsible for surveillance—but without the ability to verify whether or not surveillance is actually occurring—the Panopticon creates self-subscribed surveillance. Using a similar model, social media platforms provoke users to constantly submit self-generated content and personal information, willingly subscribing themselves to a world of

²³ Miltiadis Kandias, Lilian Mitrou, Vasilis Stavrou, and Dimitris Gritzalis, “Profiling Online Social Networks Users: an Omniopicon Tool,” *International Journal of Social Network Mining* 2, no. 4 (2017): 293.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books: 1995), 195-228.

²⁵ Farinosi, “Deconstructing Bentham’s Panopticon,” 2.

digital publicity, exposure, and surveillance. Additionally, the internet fosters an environment of social exposure and has slowly eased society into the acceptance of surveillance and nonchalant assumption that everyone will likely be monitored, while hiding who exactly performs the surveillance and the motives for doing so. Social media and the internet have dangerously revolutionized the Panopticon model by lulling its ‘inmates’ into blissful apathy—simultaneously creating “novel surveillance tendencies via behavior and sentiment detection and prediction” and accessing information “without respect for social norms of distribution and appropriateness.”²⁶

The inquiry still remains as to how this digital Panopticon utilizes its surveillance, what parties serve as the surveyors of social media users, and what are the consequences of this system. Of all platforms, Facebook most exemplifies the Panopticon model and has led the way in data mining and collecting user information—for the original purpose of targeted advertising and ultimately making a profit. However, as the platform grew and fed off the collection of past data, the prediction of future data, and manipulation of user experience to achieve these predictions, Facebook accumulated a staggering aggregate of personal information and power. Regarding agents of surveillance, Facebook exposes its users to constant scrutiny under three parties: commercial and political entities, other Facebook users, and government powers.²⁷ The commercial value of Facebook originates largely from its “social graph”—the combination of users’ geographic locations, the content of their posts, biographical data, their records of interactions and engagements with posts and other users, and even user activity from other apps and sites that connect to Facebook.²⁸ Facebook’s social graph and collection of data on over two billion users, their interests, and predicted behaviors gives the platform an unparalleled, commercial power over competitors, allies, users, and even legal entities.

²⁶ Kandias, Miltiadis, Lilian Mitrou, Vasilis Stavrou, and Dimitris Gritzalis, “Profiling Online Social Networks Users: an Omniopicon Tool,” 2.

²⁷ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 57.

²⁸ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 58.

The social network has also opened the door to new depths of social and peer-based surveillance. As people lose their jobs over risky photos or comments made online, post content that exposes the behavior of others, tag people in photos or posts, live-stream their day, harass, bully, stalk, and more—each user lives under perpetual social scrutiny from both friends and strangers, turning the everyday individuals a person interacts with into the tower of the Panopticon. The frightening pinnacle of this reality, the People You May Know feature on Facebook, urges people to grant Facebook access to their address books for ease of transferring information which shares the personal information of countless other people who have no way of opting out.

“Those email addresses and mobile phone numbers served as identifiers to Facebook profiles. And because Facebook’s social graph traced connections among profiles, the People You Know feature had the ability to connect people who were quite distant, estranged, hostile, or even violent toward each other. Because no user could control what information lies in another’s address book, no user could opt out of the feature. Users are at the mercy of other people and their understanding of how Facebook uses personal information.” (Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, 58.)

Now imagine an online platform possessing access to every email address, phone number, and home address of both users and even people without an account, along with their recorded interests and predicted behaviors, utilized by a strong, authoritarian government. The embrace and adaptation of social media resources by government entities has been coined “networked authoritarianism” by author Rebecca Mackinnon—describing the modes by which governments such as China, India, and Russia have kept tabs on their populations while also censoring and manipulating content.²⁹ In several cases (discussed later), State use of Facebook, WhatsApp, and GroupMe has led to the oppression of specific demographics, tracking of journalists and dissenters, spread of propaganda, stifling of rival movements,

²⁹ Rebecca Mackinnon, “Chinas ‘Networked Authoritarianism,’” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 32–46.

and infiltration of factions.³⁰ Foucault succinctly encompasses these realities in his belief that for a state to monitor and alter the behavior of its people, “all that was needed was ‘a gaze,’ an endlessly inspecting gaze” that would cause people to monitor themselves—and even each other in the case of social media—effectively establishing power with little effort.³¹

A study in 2014, examining datasets collected from Twitter and YouTube, tested the ease at which an entity can accurately and algorithmically classify social media users based on uploaded content and found it both accessible and useful in both advertisement and personality profiling as well as behavior prediction. In light of the data, the study found it possible to accurately extract personal information from user-generated content—specifically related to users’ political affiliations and perceptions of authority—and thus potentially useful in Panoptic activity, raising legal and ethical issues.³² As mentioned before, social media often reduces people to their social affiliations, but through the practices of predictive data mining and targeted profiling, these platforms reduce people even further into mere data points and algorithmic assumptions. As people become further classified under social, commercial, and political frameworks—with friends focusing on performative actions, companies paying for predicted buying patterns, and campaigns investing in algorithmically tracked behaviors—society risks placing the data used to profile people above the actual people.

“In a micro-social level, data mining of social media content may lead to extended discriminations and prejudice against persons and groups.” A visible risk to consider is the possibility for discrimination in the workplace: Online social media profiles, blogs,

³⁰ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 61.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, edited and translated by Colin Gordon, (New York: Pantheon Books: 1980), 155.

³² Kandias, Miltiadis, Lilian Mitrou, Vasilis Stavrou, and Dimitris Gritzalis, “Profiling Online Social Networks Users,” 2.

tweets, and online fora are increasingly monitored by employers searching for information that may provide insight on employees and prospective hires.”³³

The internet and social media has revolutionized the Panopticon, creating a surveillance-entity that not only utilizes a central authority and fixed self-participation, but an additional system of peer-based surveillance and user-participation that actively increases over time.

Why Do We Use It?

The simple answer as to why people continue to gorge themselves on social media: it gives people what they want. Social media does not try to change peoples’ minds or give a deeper understanding of issues. These platforms simply create a world—browsable, easy to understand, tailored to users, agreeable, sensational—and people happily accept it because ironically people feel safest and most in control while blinded to reality. Social media did not invent human tendencies and how to exploit them, it merely innovated the field and effectively capitalized on existing, core traits of human reasoning.

In 1979, Stanford conducted an experiment in which a group of students—half in favor of capital punishment, believing it to have a deterrent effect on crime, and half opposed to the practice, believing it to have no effect on crime—were chosen to respond to two different studies.³⁴ One study provided data in support of capital punishment and the deterrence argument while the other provided data in opposition of this argument, but the researchers had fabricated both studies, designing them to present equally persuasive data and arguments. The experiment

³³ Kandias, “Profiling Online Social Networks Users,” 9.

³⁴ Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, “Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098–2109.

yielded two-fold results: the students first evaluated the studies based on prior beliefs, rating the study that agreed with their view as more credible and convincing than the other, and ultimately, the supporters of capital punishment ended up further convinced of their view while those opposed were more adverse. Authors Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber address this subject of “confirmation bias,” the tendency of people to accept information that supports their beliefs and reject the information that contradicts them, by claiming that human reason’s main focus is not intellectual problem-solving, but navigating hyper-social environments.³⁵ They refer to this as “myside bias” and propose that humans evolved to cooperate and socialize in ways other animals did not, but to survive in such a group-based environment, humans had to develop a natural protection of their own beliefs and social affiliations while developing a skepticism of others.³⁶ To test the effects of confirmation/myside bias, Mercier and Sperber performed an experiment in which people answered simple reasoning problems and then had the chance to look back over and change answers—only fifteen percent of which modified their responses.³⁷ In the next and final step, participants reviewed one of the problems and received both their answer to the problem and the answer of another participant, with the chance to once again change the responses. However, the answers presented as someone else’s were actually their own and their own responses were someone else’s—a trick discovered by half of the participants, but of the other half almost sixty percent now found their own responses inadequate and rejected them. What may have once enabled humans to support themselves ideologically for survival and social

³⁵ Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2017).

³⁶ Mercier and Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason*.

³⁷ Elizabeth Kolbert, “Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds,” *The New Yorker* (2019).

proress now seems to subscribe society to the ploys of social media, the deconstruction of effective discourse, and the inability to reason. This mismatch is “one of the many cases in which an environment changed too quickly for natural selection to catch up.”³⁸

Furthermore, humanity also enjoys living in a world where they know *of* many things, but little information *about* those things—people survive on a peer-based, knowledge system in which they rely on the knowledge of others to account for the unknowns of their own lives. Authors Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach discuss this concept, “illusion of explanatory depth,” which states that people tend to believe they know much more than they really do, claiming it exists by division of cognitive labor.³⁹ If asked to rate one’s understanding of devices such as toilets, zippers, and locks and then asked to describe the mechanics of the devices, people reveal the startling gap between their perceived knowledge and actual knowledge of the subjects.⁴⁰ But despite these gross discrepancies in knowledge, people continue to live normally because while they might not understand how something works, someone else does and has designed it to operate with ease. Humanity rests on the natural, open boundaries between an individual’s knowledge and expertise and those of other people or the group as a whole—as people continue to live without knowing much but thinking they do and the people around them enabling this belief. Again, social media exacerbates this flaw in human reasoning, exponentially increasing reliance on the knowledge and content of other people and convincing people they have a good understanding of an array of diverse and serious issues. As public mediums of

³⁸ Kolbert, “Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds.”

³⁹ Steven A. Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion : Why We Never Think Alone*, (New York: Riverhead Books: 2017).

⁴⁰ Kolbert, Elizabeth. “Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds.”

communication begin to encourage the cultivation of falsely perceived knowledge on more and more topics, this causes trouble in political, religious, medical, scientific, and journalistic domains.

“If your position on, say, the Affordable Care Act is baseless and I rely on it, then my opinion is also baseless. When I talk to Tom and he decides he agrees with me, his opinion is also baseless, but now that the three of us concur we feel that much more smug about our views.” (Elizabeth, Kolbert, “Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds.”)

Though problematic, this reality brings pleasure and temporary fulfillment to users of social media. Subscribing to the rampant content of endless, online sources and an easily scrollable news feed, people can expand their perceived knowledge from encompassing daily activities and devices to more intense topics such as climate change, global politics, the science behind vaccination, and conflict in Syria. Social media makes it easier and more satisfying to live ignorantly, knowing of many things and never needing to know about them.

A final explanation for social media's successfully captivating its audience lies in the natural, human desire for social affirmation from one's own community. Going back to the origins of Zuckerberg's social empire, visiting the concepts of his first sites HotOrNot.com and Facemash, reveals the foundation of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter's success. Combining the inconsistency of Skinner's box and the self-participation of the Panopticon, HotOrNot.com achieved great success in 2001 which “showed Zuckerberg and many others that there was a significant number of people willing to subject their images to judgement and possible humiliation for the slight and sporadic reward of a signal of approval.”⁴¹ The process of HotOrNot.com resembled social gambling, with payment in the form of submitted photos and a

⁴¹ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 40.

reward of affirmation, but soon Zuckerberg added an innovative aspect: socialness. While at Harvard, Zuckerberg created the site Facemash which took the core concept of HotOrNot.com, but took university photos of students from Harvard's system, placed two side-by-side, and asked users to choose the more attractive one. "The impressive thing about Facemash was its rapid proliferation" as "its socialness made the service go beyond Zuckerberg's control" and spread in a way that similar sites never achieved.⁴² Zuckerberg's short-lived project proved that what makes social affirmation significantly more appealing is the ability to exchange affirmation with people you know, blurring the lines between your online and offline networks. People want to participate in the addictive, unpredictable, rewards-based system of social media—they crave endless, potato chip bites of feedback from the world around them—and this is exactly what social media intends to provide.

⁴² Vaidhyathan, *Antisocial Media*, 41.

2. Destabilization

“We Are Not Alone”

In the past decade, social media has proven a revolutionary, formidable force in mobilizing and empowering movements with not only the capability of widespread communication, but the capability to generate digital support that, in turn, gives the impression of tangible, offline action. However, often heralded by the Western world as vessels of democratic change and champions in the fight for freedom, internet access and social media often do not yield such results. These platforms succeed in merely amplifying the polarization and sensationalization of a movement—not in solidifying a cohesive voice that effectively persists beyond the movement. Because of how it focuses on shallow, emotionally compelling content, “Facebook is a powerful tool for motivation,” but “a useless tool for deliberation.”⁴³ Looking at the social media campaigns that propelled the success of ISIS and the 2011 Egyptian Arab Spring, one must set aside the democratic lens through which society often views social media and see how the use of these technologies promotes extremism and fails at achieving true democracy.

In arguing that social media sites promote chaos over democracy, the best place to begin is the phenomenon of ISIS’s success, exemplifying the way online communication fosters and breeds turmoil. With the aid of social media, ISIS has recruited over 30,000 foreign supporters from 100 countries, established branches in several other countries, publicly declared war on the United States, and choreographed gruesome videos for digital distribution.⁴⁴ “The self-styled

⁴³ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 132.

⁴⁴ Emerson T. Brooking and P. W. Singer, “War Goes Viral,” *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/war-goes-viral/501125/>.

Islamic State owes its existence to what the internet has become with the rise of social media—a vast chamber of online sharing and conversation and argumentation and indoctrination, echoing with billions of voices.”⁴⁵ ISIS even launched their military invasion of northern Iraq with the online campaign, #AllEyesOnISIS, which used Twitter, Facebook, and a separate, smartphone app to document the group’s victories and shocking atrocities along their way to the city of Mosul.⁴⁶ After a campaign of indiscernibly false and real stories—documenting the apparent crumble of Iraq and fabricating the strength of ISIS—the forces of 25,000 heavily-equipped Iraqi soldiers surrendered Mosul over to only 1,500 ISIS soldiers. Media prowess has fueled the intense expansion and growth of ISIS between 2013 and 2014 and led to degrees of victory and intimidation that seem to lie outside the reach of the group’s actual capabilities. However, their success does not come primarily from particular, internet savvy, but from social media’s success itself—ISIS merely needed to conform its narrative to fit the design of these platforms.

By aligning its narrative closely with the many ways, as previously discussed, in which platforms like Facebook grip users’ attention, elicit emotional response, and fabricate a false reality, the Islamic State capitalizes on the same, exact strategies. Ultimately, this leads to the formation of;

“a centralized narrative, but a diversity of voices is used to spread the interlinked stories and messages supporting it. There are, however, some apparent contradictions in the narrative when looking at some IS messages. On the one hand you find images and accounts of mass-graves, beheadings and seized territory with deterring messages like

⁴⁵ Brooking and Singer, “War Goes Viral.”

⁴⁶ Brooking and Singer, “War Goes Viral.”

“oppose us and we will behead you or crucify you” embedded in them. But on the other hand you also find “hearts and minds”-like imagery and messaging depicting social activities like delivering food to combat areas and other community work and IS’s apparent love of cute kittens.” (Nissen, Thomas E. “Terror.com - IS’s Social Media Warfare in Syria and Iraq.” *Military Studies Magazine*, 2014, 3.)

ISIS follows the Zuckerberg model: an indistinguishable feed of diverse sources, shallow and sensationalized content, an emphasis of visual imagery, and inconsistent feedback that keeps an audience pressing the lever. The group’s mission shifts between ideologies of stability and savage chaos—a twofold strategy of bringing order to regions of anarchy and disorder to regions of stability. This seemingly paradoxical vision to unify all of Islam through practices of destabilization and division actually embodies Twitter and Facebook’s approach to unifying a world full of divisive, contradictory opinions and content within their platforms. Leading jihadist theorist Abu Bakr Naji, urges the Islamic State to break the West’s “deceptive media halo” and the American narrative of undivided stability, using “their own media capabilities that are able to provide the truth.”⁴⁷ While Western society and the creators of this technology often wish to view social media as an agent of democracy, the truth differs immensely—chaos and subversion thrive on social media at the expense of freedom.

Social media’s role in the Egyptian revolution, during the 2011 Arab Spring, offers another exemplary case in which this technology succeeds in garnering motivation, but ultimately fails in fostering deliberation or stability. The revolution began with the brutal, public beating of Khaled Said at the hands of police in 2010. While an event such as this might

⁴⁷ Brendan I. Koerner, “Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War.” *Wired*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>.

normally disappear under cover-ups and further corruption, the mass publication of photos and videos on social media made disappearance impossible. In 2011, over eight million Egyptians used Facebook, over one million used Twitter, and within the first week of the revolution users had viewed nearly nine million YouTube pages.⁴⁸ Though the triggers of the revolution varied, social media seemed to quickly accelerate its effects and became the medium of uprising. One activist notably stated, “We use Facebook to schedule protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.”⁴⁹ After thirty years of corruption, serious cases of oppression, rampant issues, and protests in 2006 and 2008, President Hosni Mubarak finally stepped down after eighteen days of continuous protest in 2011 and “the answer seemed so simple: Facebook.”⁵⁰ Famous activist and Google employee at the time, Wael Ghonim, helped run the Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said” which served as a platform for collective unrest and transformed the potential of protest. Social media grants a level of accessibility, ease of use, and mobility that quickly lowers the barriers of communication and organization and as Ghonim once claimed;

“it basically gave us all the impression that ‘wow, I’m not alone,’ there are lots of people who are frustrated. There are lots of people who are frustrated. There are lots of people who share the same dream.” (Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 129.)

⁴⁸ Nadine Chebib and Rabia Sohali. “The Reasons Social Media Contributed To The 2011 Egyptian Revolution .” *International Journal of Business Research and Management* 2, no. 3 (2011): 73–96.

⁴⁹ Chebib and Sohali. “The Reasons Social Media Contributed To The 2011 Egyptian Revolution,” 77.

⁵⁰ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 129.

Just as social media digitally amplified the meager forces of ISIS into a seemingly massive army, these platforms helped catalyze the Egyptian protests by convincing its supporters of its momentum, of a tangible and critical mass strong enough even to oppose an authoritarian regime. Ghonim once told CNN, “this revolution started on Facebook,” however; it did not end in freedom.⁵¹

A military regime quickly took over in 2013 and now a brutal, authoritarian dictatorship holds power once again. After the revolution in 2011, the movement stalled out, attempting to organize elections and a new government, but never achieving cohesive or lasting authority. Protests and revolutions have been occurring throughout all of history—some succeeding and some failing—and while social media has the ability to accelerate the process and amplify the sentiment that “we are not alone,” it merely fooled the world into thinking that Facebook and Twitter support democracy. These platforms are most effective in destabilizing regimes rather than building them. Once the protest movement took power, it was no different and fared no better against the chaos of social media. In 2015, Ghonim withdrew his previous sentiments, casting a new light on the events of 2011 by stating;

“the euphoria faded, we failed to build consensus and the political struggle led to intense polarization. The same tool that united us to topple dictators eventually tore us apart. Social media only amplified that state by amplifying the spread of misinformation, rumors, echo chambers, and hate speech. The environment was purely toxic. My online world became a battleground filled with trolls, lies, and hate speech. I started to worry about the safety of my family.” (Shearlaw, Maeve. “Egypt Five Years on: Was It Ever a

⁵¹ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 130.

'Social Media Revolution'?" The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, January 25, 2016.)

The Illusion of Social Media Revolutions

“Twitter revolutions” and “Facebook revolutions” have been reoccurring over the past decade, most notably in North Africa and the Middle East, and the world continues to excitedly abandon nuance in favor of exaggerated, over-excited interpretations of social media’s role. Protestors took to the streets of Tehran in 2009, but regardless of the fact that protests had regularly arisen in Iran, American media framed the situation as more about social media and less about political strife simply because protestors had begun using Twitter. As often overlooked by news coverage, Twitter mostly resulted in miscommunication and misinformation as 140-character messages inadequately expressed the movement’s depth and suspicious accounts began spreading false information as well. The movement’s social media presence garnered international support, but in the form of “slacktivism” which “describes such feel-good but useless internet activism” as showing solidarity through Facebook groups, sharing tweets, and exchanging messages of virtual support.⁵² Global media activism at best capitalized on unproductive, self-serving opportunities and at worst became harmful to the actual movement. The digital movement ironically ended when American Twitter users attempted to help Iranians attack government web sites and accidentally disabled the entire Iranian internet along with protestors’ ability to use social media for further organization and planned protest.⁵³

⁵² Evgeny Morozov, “Iran: Downside to the ‘Twitter Revolution.’” *Dissent* 56, no. 4 (2009): 10–14.

⁵³ Morozov, “Iran: Downside to the ‘Twitter Revolution,’” 14.

Additionally, the entire narrative of a social media-inspired Arab Spring began in 2011 with the Tunisian protests, but this movement ended up rising and falling in a way the Egyptian one did just a few years later. Two years after protesting forced out the Tunisian president, the movement lost traction and the country fell once more into tumultuous, political conflict and restlessness—now facing new protests and an uncertain future.⁵⁴ With the failure of social media to remedy the complex, deeply rooted conflicts of Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and the entire Arab Spring movement, one must ask why Western media drags this technology into the spotlight. The tired, reused narrative of social media’s democratic benevolence is simply ignorant, narcissistic, and wrong. It presents a merely endearing theory, “dreamed up and advanced by cyber-utopian Western commentators, who finally got a chance to prove that billions of hours that humanity wastes on Twitter and Facebook are not spent in vain.”⁵⁵ When these revolutions occur, Western media jumps at the chance to argue that Western technology and inventiveness are saving the rest of the world—completely undermining the actual historical context and political depth of these movements, the issues they face, and the failure of Western media platforms to do anything but exacerbate the problems. However, when the reality of social media’s appetite for destabilization hits the Western world, its media finally begins to see the problem and understand the gravity of the situation.

Brexit and The 2016 Election

Interestingly, the recent, political influence of social media has adopted a less favorable light from Western media as the chaos of Facebook and the internet has begun impacting

⁵⁴ Owen Barnell, “Seven Years after Arab Spring Revolt, Tunisia's Future Remains Uncertain,” *France 24*, December 18, 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20171217-tunisia-seven-years-after-arab-spring-revolution-protests-economic-uncertainty>.

⁵⁵ Morozov, “Iran: Downside to the ‘Twitter Revolution,’” 12.

Western democracy, notoriously affecting the outcomes of Britain’s decision to leave the EU and the United States’ 2016 presidential election. After years of investigation, one still cannot say with certainty the degree to which social media swayed a decision in these cases, but its involvement undoubtedly had an effect and the implications warrant concern. The story involves several major parties: Aaron Banks, Robert Mercer, Alexander Nix, the company Cambridge Analytica, its parent company SCL, Global Science Research, the company Eldon Insurance, and two Cambridge researchers. But, there exists one major force which ties them all together—Facebook and the power of data.

In 2013, Dr. David Stillwell, Michael Kosinski, and Aleksandr Kogan were conducting research at the Psychometric Centre at Cambridge University based on the OCEAN model of psychometrics which consists of five core, personality traits, accounting for the initials of the model’s name.⁵⁶ Using this system, researchers place a subject somewhere in the matrix of these five traits based on collected data samples and use the results to generate predictive models of behavior. However, finding people to consistently participate in extensive questionnaires presented a problem, pushing the Psychometric Centre to the revolutionary use of Facebook data “through the development of the ‘MyPersonality’ online quiz.”⁵⁷ The online app seemed harmless enough as part of a growing trend in personality quizzes, but it granted researchers access not only to the participants’ answers, but to other online data, including a user’s likes, shares, and posts on Facebook. The researchers claimed that by “referring to as few as 68

⁵⁶ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 153.

⁵⁷ Information Commission’s Office. “Investigation into the Use of Data Analytics in Political Campaigns: A Report to Parliament,” (2018), 28.

Facebook ‘likes,’ they were able to predict with a high degree of accuracy a number of characteristics and traits, as well as other details such as ethnicity and political affiliation.”⁵⁸

At this time in 2014, Facebook’s lack of data security presented an extremely troubling reality—the platform allowed app developers access to both the data of users who actively agreed to participate as well as the data of their Facebook friends who had no say in this access. Hoping to capitalize on this rampant access to information, the company SCL, which engages in political consulting and owns the company Cambridge Analytica, approached the researchers about licensing the app and model. While Stillwell and Kosinski declined, Dr. Kogan offered his help. Once SCL acquired the model, Cambridge Analytica and Kogan renamed the app “thisisyourdigitallife” and set up a new company Global Science Research which implemented the app and simultaneously shared all collected data with Cambridge Analytica—estimated to include information on up to 87 million global, Facebook users.⁵⁹ The app harvested information about a user’s profile, news feed, date of birth, current residence, tagged photos, liked pages, posted content, email addresses, and similar information pertaining to their Facebook friends as well. Dr. Kogan explained that the answers to the app’s survey, combined with this additional information, provided Global Science Research with a data model, able to “predict how the user was likely to vote.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Information Commission’s Office, “Investigation,” 28.

⁵⁹ Information Commission’s Office, “Investigation,” 26.

⁶⁰ Information Commission’s Office, “Investigation,” 31.

Two years later, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica Alexander Nix gave a presentation, “The Power of Big Data and Psychographics,” in which he boasted about the power of psychographic profiling and even made the claim that;

“by having hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Americans undertake this survey [they] were able to form a model to predict the personality of every single adult in the United States of America.” (Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 151.)

By no coincidence, Steve Bannon—who served on the board of Cambridge Analytica—stepped down in 2016 to aid the failing Trump campaign and brought with him the help of CA’s technology. After Trump’s victory, Nix followed up with another weighty claim that the company’s “revolutionary approach to data-driven communication has played such an integral part in President-elect Trump’s extraordinary win.”⁶¹ Bankrolled by billionaire, conservative Robert Mercer, connected through Steve Bannon, and informed by the work of Aleksandr Kogan, Cambridge Analytica had found a way to inform Trump’s presidential campaign and profit from its success.

Regarding the Brexit decision, Cambridge Analytica once more entangled itself in a data-driven web of companies and political interests, involving the Leave. EU campaign, the United Kingdom Independence Party, Arron Banks, and the company Eldon Insurance. The Leave. EU campaign and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) both served as the forefront in supporting Britain’s decision to leave and have denied employing CA or the use of its data in any capacity. However, Brittany Kaiser—former head of business development at Cambridge Analytica—claims “the fact remains that chargeable work was done by Cambridge Analytica, at

⁶¹ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 152.

the direction of Leave.Eu and UKIP executives, despite a contract never being signed.”⁶² A series of internal emails between CA and the political groups, submitted to Parliament, has outlined a relationship that supports Kaiser’s claims and conflicts with the groups’ denials. Additionally, Arron Banks—co-founder of the Leave.EU campaign—has expressed varying degrees of involvement with the data analytics firm, stating, “when we said we’d hired Cambridge Analytica, maybe a better choice of words could have been deployed.”⁶³ Regardless, these political groups merely point to the fact that no formal contract exists and no payment occurred for data services, but higher management from both sides and whistleblower Chris Wylie from CA’s research team have all confirmed the use of Cambridge Analytica’s data by Brexit campaigns. Another aspect of data misuse lies in Eldon Insurance, an insurance company owned by Banks and accused of sharing customer data with Banks’ other venture Leave.EU via private email accounts.⁶⁴ Though still unclear, the report submitted to Parliament details that the general weakness of Eldon Insurance’s control over customer data has allowed for its access by Leave.EU staff on many occasions.⁶⁵

Once again, powerful, wealthy individuals have used their companies to connect and fund campaigns in a matter that borderlines the dealings of a criminal syndicate, but the instances of Brexit and the 2016 Trump campaign present a new dimension—the unethical use of social

⁶² Mark Scott, “Cambridge Analytica Did Work for Brexit Groups, Says Ex-Staffer,” *POLITICO*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/cambridge-analytica-leave-eu-ukip-brexit-facebook/>.

⁶³ Scott, “Cambridge Analytica.”

⁶⁴ Adam Satariano and Nicholas Confessore, “Cambridge Analytica's Use of Facebook Data Broke British Law, Watchdog Finds,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/technology/cambridge-analytica-arron-banks.html>.

⁶⁵ Investigation Commission’s Office, “Investigation,” 46.

media's data. Ironically, when the connection between these campaigns and Facebook first came to light, Western media vigorously fed the flames of the story, pursuing a dramatic narrative that presented Cambridge Analytica and its data as the secret, swing vote that directly put Trump in office and pushed the UK to leave. While discussing the political situations of the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, India, etc., Western media poses social media platforms as a gateway to democracy, but when they interfere in North American and European politics—social media becomes a calculating, unethical means to undermining the democratic process. And if media pundits always reported this second, darker reality, they would be correct in doing so.

The politicization of social media—breaching, collecting, and profiting off users' data for the purpose of targeted campaigning—represents a deeply manipulative process that reduces human voters to data points within models of predicted voting behavior. While the implications these practices have on the future of democracy and campaigns raises serious concerns, Cambridge Analytica merely represents the beginning and the actual impact of its involvement remains largely unknown and largely overstated. In the aftermath of this data-incited panic, the story has slowly tempered out into a more realistic vision as the story's central figures, Nix, Cambridge Analytica, Banks, and others have revised their previous, bold statements. Political scientist David Karpf explains the reality of the situation and its wake of media panic, stating;

“Targeted advertising based on psychometrics is conceptually quite simple and practically very complicated. And there is no evidence that Cambridge Analytica has solved the practical challenges of applying psychometrics to voter behavior. The simple explanation here is that Cambridge Analytica has been engaging in the time-honored Silicon Valley tradition of developing a minimum viable product, marketing the hell out of it to drum up customers, and then delivering a much more mundane-but-workable

product. The difference here is that Cambridge Analytica's marketing has gotten caught up in our collective search for the secret formula that put Donald Trump in the White House." (Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 156).

As the dust settles and the accumulated boasting, panic, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation comes to a halt, the situation takes a more focused but equally alarming perspective—big data has become the new, political consultant. Peoples' data extends far beyond them, reaching audiences and leaving traces that are unpredictable and unknown. When this data falls into the hands of social media platforms, insurance companies, retail companies, internet browsers, location services and any party willing to pay for it, the need for firms like Cambridge Analytica and corporate syndicates disappear. The problem lies in Facebook's deception, its unethical breach in collecting and sharing data, and the power that comes with this exploitation. Facebook and its competitors continue to amass and analyze unparalleled amounts of information that pertain to the largest, global community of users ever created—all while society panics over smaller, paper tigers and occasionally fines Facebook after the damage is already done. In short, social media undermines democracy and becomes increasingly influential and dangerous as society heads towards a data-dominant world in which political victories are won digitally.

Russian Propaganda and the 2016 Election

When discussing the effect of social media on democracy and the 2016 election, one cannot avoid the topic of Russian propaganda, the history of Russian misinformation campaigns, and how the country has revolutionized its tactics by utilizing social media platforms. Russia's influence on the 2016 presidential campaign has been a widely discussed topic since it first surfaced, but there still remains a significant degree of uncertainty regarding its effect on the election's outcome and how it managed to undermine the election's democratic process.

According to Alex Stamos, the chief security officer of Facebook at the time, Russian interference in the electoral process consisted of approximately \$100,000 in ad spending from June 2015 to May 2017—“associated with roughly 3,000 ads” connected “to about 470 inauthentic accounts and pages... affiliated with one another and likely operated out of Russia.”⁶⁶ Facebook also released a white paper in which they detailed the organized, disruptive misuse of the platform, stating;

“the vast majority of ads run by these accounts did not specifically reference the US presidential election, voting, or a particular candidate. Rather, the ads and accounts appeared to focus on amplifying divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum—touching on topics from LGBT matters to race issues to immigration to gun rights.” (“An Update On Information Operations On Facebook,”)

Russia’s social media presence took various forms including, fake accounts, shared content, divisive posts and comments, organized events, groups, and advertisements. The primary offense occurred through Russia’s capitalization on Facebook’s Unpublished Page Post advertisement service—which offers ad space within the flow of users’ news feeds for a low cost but with high effectiveness, ease of use, and visibility. Other activities include instances in which Russians orchestrated purposefully divisive situations such as the case in May 2016 when two Russian Facebook pages organized opposing rallies in front of the Islamic Da’wah Center of Houston.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “An Update On Information Operations On Facebook.” *About Facebook*, November 7, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/09/information-operations-update/>.

⁶⁷ Claire Allbright, “A Russian Facebook Page Organized a Protest in Texas. A Different Russian Page Launched the Counterprotest,” *The Texas Tribune*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/11/01/russian-facebook-page-organized-protest-texas-different-russian-page-1/>.

The page United Muslims of America hosted a “Save Islamic Knowledge” rally for the same place and time as the separate Russian-controlled page Heart of Texas hosted the event, “Stop Islamification of Texas.”⁶⁸ For \$200 worth of ads, Russians pitted Americans against one another in a farcical protest/counter-protest situation on the streets of Houston by simply posting on Facebook from computers in St. Petersburg. By analyzing the sample of 3,000 ads released by Congress, one can observe how Russia has effectively utilized Facebook to revolutionize the efficiency, affordability, and ease at which disinformation campaigns can spread divisiveness and polarization without any clear, cohesive message at all.

The Heart of Texas

With the help of fellow peers—Ari Hayaud-Din, Molly Dishman, Morgan Christiansen, and Remi Gambino—I have conducted research on a sample of Russian advertisements from the 2016 presidential election to further reveal evidence of social media’s influence on public discourse, democracy, and individual, user perceptions of political issues. This case study serves to outline the ways in which the social media platforms have revolutionized the concept of propaganda and the ability of parties to curates extreme, divisive discourse on a large scale. This study serves as a form of quantitative content analysis, seeking to reveal whether the operations of the Russian intelligence on social media during 2015 and 2016 align with traditional definitions of propaganda, push divisive issues, and take a side in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The research proceeds with the inquiry of these issues through developing a codebook that tests advertisements for the definition of propaganda, looks for the presence of divisive issues, and evaluates whether the ad campaigns present presidential candidates in a positive or negative light. The included ads derive from a publicly-available

⁶⁸ Allbright, “A Russian Facebook Page Organized a Protest in Texas.”

folder of over 3,000 ads purchased by Russian Facebook accounts and released by the House Intelligence Committee in Congress. We chose advertisements according to the fulfillment of two criteria: whether Texas-related pages, such as the Heart of Texas page, created and posted the ads and whether the ads occurred between July of 2015 and December of 2016. Out of the total population of over 3,000 Russian ads that Congress released, 62 met each of these criteria and thus comprised the sample.

The resulting data concerns the cost, content, influence, partisanship, and divisiveness of the ad campaigns. The 62 ads ultimately reached a total of over 567,340 people, with an average of 14,547 impressions per ad. The total amount of money spent to reach that many people was \$5000.69, resulting in an average cost of \$80.66 for the bought ads. Regarding imagery and content, 61 out of the 62 advertisements contained an image and only one of those 61 images did not have text in conjunction with the image. Furthermore, a specific motif throughout the ad campaign that manifested itself during research was the employment of a call to action. 23 ads called for Texas and its residents to succeed, 10 advertised a tangible event and promoted the attendance of it, and 19 of the ads prompted further interaction with the post in the form of a like, share, comment, etc. Concerning partisanship, only 6 ads mention Clinton or Trump, but all present negative attitudes towards Clinton and the three that mention Trump contain positive attitudes towards him. Lastly, research determined that 42 of the ads contained divisive issues (specific categorization of the issues found in the table below) and exhibited the qualities of presenting an out-group and attitudes in response to that group.

Table 1. Amount of References to Potentially Divisive Topics

References to:	# of ads:	% of total ads:
Islam	14	22.5
Christianity	7	11.3
Guns/2nd Amendment	25	40.3
Secession	23	37.1
Terrorism	13	20.9
Barack Obama	7	11.3
Police/Policing	4	6.4
Race/Black Lives Matter	2	3.2
Immigration	5	8.1

Russia’s Facebook campaign redefines propaganda and disinformation tactics by utilizing a new context that flourishes from sensationalism and rivalry rather than merely supporting one side. The advertisements largely concern divisive issues rather than public figures—understanding that to undermine the democratic process, the inability to have public discussion or relate to opposing parties is more significant than fueling candidates’ rivalries. Additionally, the ads often present multiple perspectives on each issue, as in the case of competing anti and pro-Islamic rallies in Houston, rather than throwing support behind one argument as propaganda normal does. Though generally supporting Trump, the Russian campaign makes a point of focusing less on candidates and one-sided opinions because Russia’s goal is not to convince the American public of a single candidate or argument’s validity, but to undermine the ability to deliberate entirely. With the help of Facebook, the campaign also succeeded in revolutionizing the efficiency of distributing misinformation. While local television ads may cost a few thousand

dollars to air and national ads reach into the hundreds of thousands, Russia's ad campaign used 62 ads at an average rate of \$80 per ad to reach an audience of nearly 600,000 people. Additionally, Russia's ad campaign successfully exploited Facebook's tendency to amplify strong, emotional content, using the majority of ads to pinpoint divisive issues that will garner the most user reactions and comments. In 14 ads that reference Islam, 13 refer to terrorism as Russians capitalize on the rewarded radicalization of ideas by Facebook and discuss non-negotiable, polarizing topics such as secession rather than informed voting or legislative reform. The focus of both Facebook and the Russian ad campaign does not include providing a better understanding of issues or giving a realistic look at both sides in order to foster constructive discussion. Facebook's model encourages people to overreact to shallow, misunderstood pieces of information—and Russia simply adapted their campaign to fit this model. Facebook has essentially lowered the barrier of entry for its content both financially and regarding quality, allowing for this ad campaign to reach a large audience at low cost. In short, the Russian ad campaign utilizes a combination of imagery and shallow polarization to engage social media users and prompt them to take any further action apart from constructive understanding or deliberation. By calling for extreme action, these ads propose succession rather than compromise and sensationalize issues such as the “fight against terrorism” as opposed to encouraging compromise, informed voting, and realistic views of the issues. Facebook and social media platforms not only encourage campaigns of propaganda and disinformation—they actively revolutionize them.

Russia's Disinformation Playbook

Throughout the past century, most notably during the Cold War, Russia has engaged in the practice of “active measures,” an innovative approach to global, intelligence operations that

social media has since modernized and other countries have begun to learn from and utilize as well. “Unlike the classic espionage, which involves the collection of foreign secrets, active measures aim at influencing events—at undermining a rival power with forgeries, front groups, and countless other techniques.”⁶⁹ The history of Russia’s active measures consists of endless KGB-led, disinformation campaigns, all using false information to corrode the factual reality of historical events and any reliable sense of truth surrounding them. The key to Russian disinformation lies in the dissemination of false information into foreign media, letting rumors spread at their naturally prolific rate, while the truth plays a slow game of catchup. In the 1960’s, Soviet intelligence operatives spread rumors that the United States’ government played a role in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and also circulated a forged letter during the Vietnam War that documented the existence of American bacteriological weapons.⁷⁰ Later in the 1980’s, the KGB attempted to undermine Reagan’s run for presidency, even popularizing the slogan “Reagan Means War!” but the most notorious case of Russian disinformation is the rumor that the American government created the AIDS virus at Fort Detrick, Maryland.⁷¹ The falsified story, “AIDS may invade India: Mystery disease caused by US experiments,” launched a lengthy, disinformation campaign—that only until recently has been fully exposed and still has millions of people believing in the hoax—as it surfaced through an obscure, Indian newspaper *Patriot*. Similarly, the newspaper responsible for first publishing the Russian, forged letter

⁶⁹ Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa, “Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War,” *The New Yorker*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war>, 1.

⁷⁰ Thomas Boghardt, “Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (2009), 3.

⁷¹ Osnos, Remnick, and Yaffa, “Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War,” 1.

during the Vietnam War was the *Bombay Free Press Journal*. Russian disinformation campaigns thrive on planting falsified information all over the world and publishing through unverified, unknown sources, often in developing countries, until the news story resembles a rumor—information known by the world, but without anyone knowing where it came from originally.

As the internet and social media further destabilizes public discourse and democracy, they conveniently empower and reimagine the efforts of Russia’s “active measures,” encouraging other parties to take note of and utilize similar methods as well. While Russia once used news sources all over the world, notably controlling “10 Indian newspapers and one news agency” to plant 5,510 false stories in 1975 alone, the KGB no longer depends on these resources.⁷² With current media platforms, every account, post, link, article, video, comment, and URL becomes a potential host for disinformation. Anyone can create a fake, online news source and employ countless, online profiles to share the link and react to the content until the story has fully dispersed into the public domain, inevitably convincing a number of users to believe in a complete hoax. Facebook and Twitter have encountered thousands of fake, Russian accounts, advertisements, and posts and there appears no current end in sight as the problem becomes internal.

“During the midterm elections in the United States last year, most of the false content on its site came from within the country itself” as “many of the misleading messages focused on voter suppression, with the company deleting almost 6,000 tweets that include incorrect dates for the election or that falsely claimed that Immigrations and Customs Enforcement was patrolling polling stations.” (Sheera Frenkel, Kate Conger, and Kevin Roose. “Russia's Playbook for Social Media Disinformation Has Gone Global.” [*The*

⁷² Boghardt, “Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” 6.

New York Times, January 31, 2019],

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/technology/twitter-disinformation-united-states-russia.html>.)

Additionally, while Russia and the targeted, American users themselves flooded the election process with rampant, online disinformation, other countries began executing their own version of this new, active measures playbook. “Armies of volunteers and ‘bots,’ or automated profiles” have moved “propaganda across Facebook and Twitter in efforts to undermine trust in democracy or to elect favored candidates in the Philippines, India, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere.”⁷³ Earlier this year, Twitter gave a report, stating that countries such as Venezuela and Bangladesh have been using social media to spread government propaganda and Facebook reported that Iran had launched a disinformation campaign, targeting topics such as the Syrian conflict and 9/11.⁷⁴ Social media has played a large role both in interfering with political campaigns, as in the cases of Brazil, Venezuela, and India, and in shaping public discourse on a global scale through efforts like the Iranian government’s disinformation campaign. The world seems to have descended into a chaotic state, filled with false information and sources that barrage society both from the outside and inside. But, there remains two sides to the coin. While much of this paper has shown the ability of social media to destabilize weak governments, undermine institutions of power, and disrupt public discourse, there remains an alternate reality—the ability of social media to strengthen authoritarian governments and enforce regime-specific propaganda.

⁷³ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 180.

⁷⁴ Frenkel. “Russia's Playbook for Social Media Disinformation Has Gone Global.”

3. Authoritarianism and Social Media

“Networked Authoritarianism”

During the early stages of the internet’s rise and the creation of social media, Western idealism and the misinformed efforts of Western media led to a persistent belief that the introduction of internet and social media use to the world will naturally result in democracy and liberation—but over the past decade this idealistic prediction has proven baseless and incorrect. Just before the internet age, Ronald Reagan famously stated, “the Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip”—a view later supported by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s view that global, internet freedom would strip authoritarian leadership of information control and empower the public. However, as seen in the previous cases of destabilization, just because social media allows for or bolsters something does not mean social media guarantees it. Social media may provide mediums for political movements to undermine authority, but it does not guarantee their success. Additionally, these platforms may allow for public control of information, but they do not guarantee this freedom—a detail quickly noted by powerful governments and regimes across the globe. The world often views the internet as if it represents Excalibur—a mighty sword granted specifically to those in need of its power and only to be wielded by those it chooses—but ultimately, internet access is just a sword, a weapon available to anyone who knows how to utilize it. And naturally, the stronger, more organized, and better equipped parties will likely pick up this sword more quickly and utilize it with greater deftness than the ill-prepared and disorganized ones. Social media gives the public a voice but gives authority the power to stifle it.

As the world progresses further into the internet era, methods of surveillance and control continue to expand and innovate, shifting from previous notions of standard, outright censorship

to more complex systems of precise control that go largely unnoticed. Authors Ron Diebert and Rafal Rohozinski categorize the methods of modern, state-initiated control into three “generations.”⁷⁵ The first generation of control represents an earlier model in which the state implements broad denial of internet services, blocks certain domains and servers, and publicly filters and sifts through online information. The second generation seeks to establish a legal environment that legitimizes practices of censorship and filtration, providing ways for the state to deny or remove certain information when it becomes necessary and justify both overt and covert control with the mere appearance of law. Differing from the first two generations, the third consists of a multi-dimensional approach that focuses on utilizing the internet and competing with oppositional parties in order to publicly and systematically crush them as opposed to simply denying them access. Society entered the online era, worrying mostly about the first generation of informational control—cautious of the stereotypical, early-Chinese approach to denying access broadly and strictly while also surveilling the internet manually and extensively. However, authoritarian and state powers have begun primarily using second and third generation controls with shocking and aggressive innovation and China, the state that once notoriously depended on firewall-type control, appears to lead the way.

China has revealed to the world how exploitation of the internet and online platforms—when approached with nuance, skill, and preemptive action—proves most effective in undermining opposition without invoking further resistance. In discussing China’s revolutionary approach to online control, Rebecca MacKinnon coined the phrase “networked authoritarianism”

⁷⁵ Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski, “Beyond Denial: Introducing Next-Generation Information Access Controls,” in Diebert, Palfey, Rohozinski, and Zittrain, eds., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights and Rule in Cyberspace*, (MIT Press: 2010), 6.

to describe “when an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communications technologies.”⁷⁶ As regimes adapt to the internet and social media, they exploit these resources in five major ways.⁷⁷ They organize counter-movements in response to emerging protests. They use superior technical expertise and resources to shape public discourse and frame online conversation. They stage social media as a place for the public to voice dissent, without allowing for actual appeal or protest processes. They use public figures and elites to garner support for the regime. And most viciously, they use social media to track, harass, and discredit journalists, activists, and reformist movements by using propaganda and falsified information. The theory behind networked authoritarianism consists of engagement rather than restriction—refuse to play the game and the opposition will dissent but learn to play in order to crush the opposition and people will accept it as part of the game. Within this approach;

“the government follows online chatter, and sometimes people are even able to use the Internet to call attention to social problems or injustices, and even manage to have an impact on government policies. As a result, the average person with Internet or mobile access has a much greater sense of freedom – and may even feel like they have the ability to speak and be heard – in ways that weren’t possible under classic authoritarianism. At the same time, in the networked authoritarian state there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms. People go to jail when the powers-that-be decide they are too much

⁷⁶ Rebecca Mackinnon, “Chinas ‘Networked Authoritarianism.’” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011), 34.

⁷⁷ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 187.

of a threat – and there’s nothing anybody can do about it.” (Mackinnon, Rebecca.

“Chinas ‘Networked Authoritarianism,’” 3-4)

The subtlety of networked authoritarianism has allowed varying parties all over the world to frame public discussion, spread propaganda, suppress dissent, and maintain power while providing a façade of freedom and democracy to placate the public. Regimes have found success by curating open dissent in China, spreading disinformation in Russia, avoiding full, journalistic pressure in India, and publicly undermining opposition in Azerbaijan. In contrast to widely held notions of Chinese censorship and strict internet access, social media in China is characterized by a steady source of public protest. Events such as the death of Sun Zhigang and the Xiamen protests represent instances in which the Chinese public takes to social media—raising their voice, reporting misconduct or corruption, and criticizing government action—and the government actually takes proper measures to meet the public’s demands.⁷⁸ Complete denial of discussion would incite full protest, but carefully mediated discussion avoids this problem while still not granting any significant power to the public’s voice. The Chinese public can discuss certain political issues, raise demands, and even influence certain areas of government policy, but in way that will only maintain the authoritarian regime—through placation of the public—rather than upheave it.⁷⁹ In describing this practice, Baogang He and Mark Warren have coined the term “authoritarian deliberation” to explain the way that a strong government can use internet ‘democracy’ to stabilize authoritarianism.⁸⁰ By reframing the way public discourse and social

⁷⁸ Daniel Gayo-Avello, “Social Media and Authoritarianism,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2015), 10.

⁷⁹ Gayo-Avello, “Social Media and Authoritarianism,” 11.

⁸⁰ Baogang He and Mark E. Warren, “Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 269-289.

media can bolster a regime, China's strategies have spread and taken new forms as other countries have also begun to adapt to the internet age in hopes of maintaining their authoritarian rules.

As internet access and social media use began rising in the country of Azerbaijan during the early 2010's, the government—already characterized by strictness, censorship, and fear—adapted to the new mediums of public discourse in a way that not only allowed for opposition, but publicly competed with it. The Azerbaijani adaptation of networked authoritarianism first began in 2009 with the arrest of Adnan Hajizada and Emin Milli. In the years before their arrest, the young men had helped form youth, activist groups and built a social media presence, culminating in 2009 when they posted a “donkey rights” video on YouTube. In the video, they criticized the Azerbaijani government and joked that a donkey had more rights than an Azerbaijani citizen. Two weeks later, the two men faced arrest and over the following months, the “donkey blogger” arrests became a symbol: an example that hovered over the heads of the population. After the arrests, there occurred a significant drop in activist support, further proving the core principle of networked authoritarianism—“the government would not have been able to instill this fear had it merely censored Milli and Hajizada.”⁸¹ “Only by making the internet open could they reach the frequent internet users who had become a source of consternation,” and use the competitive, online environment to “punish some people and let everyone else watch” as if to say “this is what can happen to you.”⁸² Following the events of the Arab Spring, the Azerbaijan

⁸¹ Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior, “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 287.

⁸² Pearce, and Kendzior. “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan,” 287.

government made a considerable effort, using high-profile arrests and linking social media use with public oppression, to frame online platforms as an anxiety-ridden arena where one has much to lose and little to gain.

Katy Pearce conducted extensive research on Azerbaijani media between 2009 and 2011, testing for correlations between media use and public opinion/interest in politics. She found that while social media use in Azerbaijan rapidly rose during those years—similar to the rising trends found in Iran, Egypt, and Tunisia—the use of online media for political purposes did not rise. From 2009 to 2010, the percentage of Azerbaijani citizens who believed that protests helped assert the public’s power over government fell from 53% to 27% while the percent of internet users who disagreed with online protests rose from 38% to 70%.⁸³ Pearce discovered that while internet trends and user behavior showed consistency and paralleled other countries, experiencing similar digital environments, support for protests and political dissent fell in relation to an increase in internet usage. Additionally, among the social media users interviewed by Pearce, one estimated that out of 100 online activists at the time 50 stopped using social media and 30 became ambivalent after the arrests of the “donkey bloggers.”⁸⁴ While China adapted to social media by allowing for carefully regulated dissent, Azerbaijan preemptively shut down online, political activity by making an example out of it—by choosing its opponents deliberately and ensuring their public downfall.

Russia and India have also experienced regressions into authoritarianism through the use of social media under the respective regimes of Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Modi. In St. Petersburg, there exists a company called the Internet Research Agency which employs hundreds

⁸³ Pearce, and Kendzior. “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan,” 293.

⁸⁴ Pearce, and Kendzior. “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan,” 11.

of people to create and spread disinformation through online platforms. The Russian government currently pays employees to utilize social media in an effort to advance government interests, both foreign and domestic, by undermining the trust, democracy, and institutions of other nations while undermining opposition, dissidents, and unfavorable journalism back in Russia. Putin's regime even employs state-sponsored, propaganda news sites such as Sputnik and RT which feed "journalistic" material to the digital, disinformation campaigns, creating a system in which the state controls both the sources of information and the accounts sharing the information. Using similar tactics, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under India's current prime minister Narendra Modi, has benefited greatly from the propaganda-filled, extremist-inciting nature of social media and achieved historic, majority control in Parliament. With a history of violence, nationalism and attempts to rewrite India's multi-ethnic history, both the BJP and Modi represent hateful, anti-Islamic, anti-liberal sentiments. This caustic history has made Modi and the BJP party ideal figures for garnering motivation and achieving success on Facebook.⁸⁵ Through propaganda campaigns, they have incited anti-Muslim movements, inspired voter support, favored BJP policies, and attacked the reputations of opposing journalists and activists—all under the radar of actual journalism and international bodies. Social media makes it easy for the public to consume propaganda and engage in harassment and intimidation, but hard for authoritative, regulatory bodies to find, assess, and remove that information from such a restless sea, filled with crashing waves of false, absurd content.

The Irony of "Free Basics"

In 2013, Facebook launched the Internet.org initiative in which the company partnered with several large telecommunications and software companies to work towards global, internet

⁸⁵ Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*, 189.

access. By 2015, the service became available through the platform “Free Basics” which sought to provide a free, holistic internet experience for developing and rural regions around the globe by offering a select list of stripped-down, ‘essential’ websites—all centralized within a user’s Facebook account. The service amounts to online services—relating to education, health care, messaging, weather, news and more—all provided with no data charge through the central platform of Facebook. The Free Basics program has reached 60 countries, but encountered grave consequences in many, resulting in the service’s silent discontinuation in several developing countries and the concern for its future in others. While Zuckerberg states that his vision for the program centers on providing affordable, world-wide internet access to help empower, inform, and connect people, the reality is much more capitalistic and bleak.

Ultimately, as a for-profit company, Facebook constantly looks for new opportunities to gain users and increase its influence and the Free Basics program presents a perfect way to enter massive, emerging markets like India and potentially increase Facebook’s network by billions of people. So, regardless of the vision, suddenly offering a walled-garden, internet experience—that is specifically controlled and used through Facebook’s social media platform—to overwhelmingly media-illiterate populations can yield horrifying results. “The most concerning issue with Internet.org has been its unpreparedness to serve and protect the people it is helping come online for the first time” as it “is shaping the internet experience of users—i.e. the services they can access, the services they cannot access,” and creating “a filter bubble for users that influences their worldview.”⁸⁶ The program has abruptly ended in Bolivia, Papua New Guinea,

⁸⁶ Manish Singh, “After Harsh Criticism, Facebook Quietly Pulls Services from Developing Countries,” *The Outline*, May 1, 2018. <https://theoutline.com/post/4383/facebook-quietly-ended-free-basics-in-myanmar-and-other-countries?zd=3&zi=evxbago4>.

Trinidad and Tobago, Republic of Congo, Anguilla, El Salvador, Myanmar, and Saint Lucia and another dozen Latin American countries will discontinue use as well.⁸⁷ This paper has largely documented the many ways that Facebook and social media platforms deteriorate effective means of communication and journalism—instead rewarding false, hateful, extremist content and propaganda. So, imagine what happens when the digitally illiterate, majority of a country first experiences internet entirely through Facebook, the platform’s content, users’ news feeds, and Facebook-directed websites.

To observe the harmful effects of introducing social media-centric internet use in developing countries, one must first look at the recent horrors that have taken place in Myanmar. After nearly a half century of military regimes, Myanmar began transitioning into democracy and free elections within the past decade, but experienced a major setback when Facebook introduced Free Basics in 2016, shortly after mobile phone companies and the government first introduced rampant adoption of mobile phones. Country-wide adoption of mobile phones was paired with the adoption of Facebook, resulting in the Burmese population’s belief that there exists little to no distinction between Facebook and the internet. And just as social media has helped Russia and India regress into authoritarian modes of communication and governance, the Free Basics program inspired a covert, military campaign in Myanmar. Similar to how Modi and the BJP used Facebook in bolstering their nationalist identity and spreading anti-Muslim sentiments, the military-backed, Buddhist nationalists used Facebook operations to inspire an ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Muslim Rohingya minority. The military’s Facebook operation began years ago and occurred as follows;

⁸⁷ Singh, “After Harsh Criticism.”

“They began by setting up what appeared to be news pages and pages on Facebook that were devoted to Burmese pop stars, models and other celebrities, like a beauty queen with a penchant for parroting military propaganda. They then tended the pages to attract large numbers of followers... Those then became distribution channels for lurid photos, false news and inflammatory posts, often aimed at Myanmar’s Muslims, the people said. Troll accounts run by the military helped spread the content, shut down critics and fuel arguments between commenters to rile people up. Often, they posted sham photos of corpses that they said were evidence of Rohingya-perpetrated massacres... One of the most dangerous campaigns came in 2017, when the military’s intelligence arm spread rumors on Facebook to both Muslim and Buddhist groups that an attack from the other side was imminent... making use of the anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, it spread warnings on Facebook Messenger via widely followed accounts masquerading as news sites and celebrity fan pages that “jihad attacks” would be carried out.” (Paul Mozur, “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military.” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>.)

By conjuring sentiments of fear, confusion, and hatred while posing violence against a minority group as the solution, the Buddhist, military campaign merely followed in the footsteps of history’s countless, authoritarian leaders. However, this time no one stood behind a podium, delivered a speech, or wrote a manifesto, they simply used Facebook. Eventually, the company became equipped to properly translate and filter out hateful, offensive posts and in 2018, Facebook decided to remove the Free Basics program entirely from Myanmar. However, such unprepared, unintelligible entry into a developing country—blindly creating a county’s entire

internet experience out of sensational, Western technology with no consideration of political and cultural contexts—meant that from day one of the Free Basics program, Facebook had done too little too late for Myanmar. By 2018, the anti-Rohingya movement had already forced nearly a million Muslims to flee the country and resulted in countless atrocities.

Conclusion

While this paper emphasizes the particularly innovative nature of social media, discussion of this technology falls within a larger conversation about media technology and the way that mediums of communication have constantly shifted the direction of world culture, human reasoning, and geopolitical climates. Consider how the printing press, radio, television, and internet have subsequently redefined the dimensions of a message’s range, depth, audience, and means of reception. Every medium capitalizes on similar motifs of sensationalism and dissemination—endlessly pushing the boundaries on how to reach a greater audience and how to demand even more of their attention. Dating back to the 16th century in Rome, Pietro Aretino publicly posted disparaging sonnets about political candidates, creating the “pasquinade:” a type of fake news that targeted public figures.⁸⁸ This trend further developed into a genre known as the “canard” in 17th century France, consisting of Parisian journals that often produced gripping, but false information. The mass production of dubious, printed materials reached its pinnacle in 18th century London when newspaper writers, known as “paragraph men,” reduced journalism to the practice of converting short blurbs of gossip and slander into segments of published news.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Robert Darnton, “The True History of Fake News,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 13, 2007, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/13/the-true-history-of-fake-news/>.

⁸⁹ Darnton, “The True History of Fake News.”

The printing press revolutionized communication, but revealed how new mediums can exploit the flaws in humanity's prioritization of sensationalism over truth and credibility.

However, while innovations in media technology often capitalize on the vulnerabilities of human reasoning and consumeristic tendencies, the response rarely warrants complete denial of the medium and historically society finds a way to move forward. The printing press forged a new system of literature, journalism, and unfortunately, false information, but a response soon followed in the form of peer review—the checks and balances of academia. Society has consistently proceeded each form of communication, from the printing press to television broadcasting, with ways to regulate the information, categorize its content, and certify its credibility. The problem lies in how these technological innovations seem to jump far beyond human expectations, leaving society to adapt to what it has created—a reactive existence in which the problems always occur first and the solutions slowly follow. Such discussions of social media as presented in this paper do not serve as a call for its total abandonment or even hope to dampen the steadily rising rates of social media usage. The purpose of discussing this topic is to speed up the process by which humanity finally realizes the flaws in its technology and makes the effort to properly address them. Journalism, academia, literature, radio, and television all take root in systems of regulation and certification that demand transparency and integrity, yet rarely would someone regard this as impinging on freedom of speech or representative of government intervention. Yet, when discussing regulation of social media or the internet, the public often steers the conversation towards these stigmatized notions. A call for reforming social media represents a call to prioritize truth—to once again take control of the technology that the world has created instead of allowing it to drive the world further into

darkness. It makes more sense to light up a room before ever crossing the threshold rather than doing so after stumbling through the room's entirety.

Social media has opened the world to a dystopian future that does not just conform to either the authoritarian vision of *1984* or the desensitized reality of *Brave New World*, but rather combines the two within an unnerving, symbiotic relationship. Much of this paper discusses numerous, horrifying aspects of social media that fulfill the visions of *1984*—a digital Panopticon-based existence in which authoritarian regimes and powerful companies have the ability to track every person's information, communication, and behavior in order to manipulate, exploit, and oppress entire populations. Yet, not many people care. With the rise of the internet and social media, it appears most people have grown desensitized to and even expectant of data breaches and misuses, assuming companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, etc. will simply use their information in unknown ways and not much can be done about it.

The realities of *1984* only exist with the support of *Brave New World*. Just as the Panopticon relies on the mental self-subscription of its captives, social media relies on the willing participation of its users. As people bleakly ask themselves what can be done about social media, they continue to actively opt-in, provide these platforms with endless data, and sharpen the very sword that stronger entities wield against them. The trick lies in the numbness and oversaturation of the internet era. People keep consuming digital media, entertainment, interaction, communication, journalism, and information that resemble potato chips in quality and substance. One loses track—eats a whole bag without noticing and still feels hungry—and continues to do so despite knowing that it is an unhealthy habit because a person does not see the immediate, tangible consequences, but rather consigns to facing them some other day. A person does not develop heart disease after one bag of chips—it takes incrementalism. People have grown

addicted to a system that inconsistently and sensationally rewards some users, punishes others, and leaves the rest to wait for the next, food pellet to drop. So while users may not witness or understand the damage being done to journalism, democracy, public discourse, race-relations, and notions of truth itself, they continue to blindly enable the system and incur the consequences.

In the most troubling combination of fates, society has become apathetic to its own downfall and additionally, has lost hold of any baseline for truth. With social media, any opinion can become a fact—found, shared, liked, commented on, and supported by those who agree. Social media thrives on decontextualizing information and only taking the most dramatic, surface-level, reaction-provoking aspects which has resulted in several phenomena. These include the resurgence of the anti-vaccination movement, growth in the flat earth community, increase in propaganda, rise in authoritarianism, and empowerment of extremist groups like ISIS. In *1984*, the protagonist faces torture at the hands of a regime that refuses to relent until he accepts that $2+2$ can equal 5—that ultimately, the regime decides even the most basic notions of truth. However, social media has proven that convincing society $2+2=5$ does not require torture. As long as someone believes $2+2=5$ and has a place to support their belief with an illusion of visual, evidential support and a community of like-minded people, then, in effect, people begin to live in a world where $2+2$ can equal 5. Social media may not have invented the common sentiment—a lie gets halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes—but it certainly capitalizes on the idea and has significantly contributed to creating a world in which lies run rampant and the truth struggles to keep up.

Bibliography

- “An Update On Information Operations On Facebook.” *About Facebook*, November 7, 2019. <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/09/information-operations-update/>.
- Allbright, Claire. “A Russian Facebook Page Organized a Protest in Texas. A Different Russian Page Launched the Counterprotest.” *The Texas Tribune*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/11/01/russian-facebook-page-organized-protest-texas-different-russian-page-1/>.
- Barnell, Owen. “Seven Years after Arab Spring Revolt, Tunisia's Future Remains Uncertain.” *France 24*, December 18, 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20171217-tunisia-seven-years-after-arab-spring-revolution-protests-economic-uncertainty>.
- Boghardt, Thomas. “Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign.” *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (2009). <https://doi.org/https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol53no4/pdf/U-Boghardt-AIDS-Made-in-the-USA-17Dec.pdf>.
- Brooking, Emerson T. and P. W. Singer. “War Goes Viral,” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company: October 11, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/war-goes-viral/501125/>.
- Chebib, Nadine, and Rabia Sohali. “The Reasons Social Media Contributed To The 2011 Egyptian Revolution.” *International Journal of Business Research and Management* 2, no. 3 (2011): 73–96. https://www.cscjournals.org/download/issuearchive/IJBRM/Volume2/IJBRM_V2_I3.pdf#page=73.
- Deibert, Ronald and Rafal Rohozinski. “Beyond Denial: Introducing Next-Generation Information Access Controls,” in Diebert, Palfey, Rohozinski, and Zittrain, eds., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010. 6.
- Doctorow, Cory. “TedxObserver.” Filmed in March 2011 in UK. TED video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAGjNe1YhMA>.
- Farinosi, Manuela. “Deconstructing Bentham’s Panopticon: The New Metaphors of Surveillance in the Web 2.0 Environment,” *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 9, no. 1 (2011): 62–76. <https://doi.org/10.31269/vol9iss1pp62-76>.
- Foucault, Michel. “Panopticism,” in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. 195-228.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited and translated by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 155.

- Gayo-Avello, Daniel. "Social Media and Authoritarianism." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2015). 10. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2878705>.
- Hauer, Thomas. "Education, Technological Determinism and New Media" in *INTED2017 Proceedings*. 2017. 1. <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2017.2401>.
- He, Baogang, and Mark E. Warren. "Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development." *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 269-289.
- Information Commission's Office. "Investigation into the Use of Data Analytics in Political Campaigns: A Report to Parliament." 2018. 28.
- Kandias, Miltiadis, Lilian Mitrou, Vasilis Stavrou, and Dimitris Gritzalis. "Profiling Online Social Networks Users: An Omniopicon Tool." *International Journal of Social Network Mining* 2, no. 4 (2017): 293. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijsnm.2017.091807>.
- Koerner, Brendan I. "Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War." *Wired*. May 1, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds." *The New Yorker*, July 9, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>.
- Lord, Charles G., Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper. "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098–2109. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.37.11.2098>.
- Mackinnon, Rebecca. "Chinas 'Networked Authoritarianism.'" *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0033>.
- Mercier, Hugo and Dan Sperber. *The Enigma of Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Morozov, Evgeny. "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution.'" *Dissent* 56, no. 4 (2009): 10–14. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.0.0092>.
- Moss, Michael. "The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food." *The New York Times*, February 20, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/magazine/the-extraordinary-science-of-junk-food.html>.
- Osnos, Evan, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa. "Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War." *The New Yorker*, July 9, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war>.
- Pariser, Eli. "Beware Online 'Filter Bubbles.'" TED. Accessed November 11, 2019. https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?language=en.

- Pearce, Katy E. and Sarah Kendzior. "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan." *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 283–98.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01633.x>.
- Postman, Neil. *Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change*. Denver, CO: March 28, 1998. 1.
- Satariano, Adam and Nicholas Confessore. "Cambridge Analytica's Use of Facebook Data Broke British Law, Watchdog Finds." *The New York Times*, November 6, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/technology/cambridge-analytica-arron-banks.html>.
- Scott, Mark. "Cambridge Analytica Did Work for Brexit Groups, Says Ex-Staffer." POLITICO, July 31, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/cambridge-analytica-leave-eu-ukip-brexit-facebook/>.
- , *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness*. London: Methuen, 2007.
- Singh, Manish. "After Harsh Criticism, Facebook Quietly Pulls Services from Developing Countries," *The Outline*, May 1, 2018. <https://theoutline.com/post/4383/facebook-quietly-ended-free-basics-in-myanmar-and-other-countries?zd=3&zi=evxbago4>.
- Skinner, B. F. *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis*. Acton, MA: Copley Publishing Group, 1991.
- Sloman, Steven A., and Philip Fernbach. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.
- Sontag, Susan. *Susan Sontag on Photography*. London: Allen Lane, 1978. 67.
- Sterrett, David, Dan Malato, Jennifer Benz, Liz Kantor, Trevor Tompson, Tom Rosenstiel, Jeff Sonderman, and Kevin Loker. "Who Shared It?: Deciding What News to Trust on Social Media." *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 6 (2019): 783–801.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1623702>.
- Vaidhyathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 19.

Biography

Stewart Schweinfurth was born in Dallas, Texas in 1996 and enrolled in the Plan II Honors program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2015. While at college, he studied Arabic in Amman, Jordan, interned with Makarios on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic, served with Texas Blazers, was a member of the Silver Spurs, competed on the dance team Punjabbawockeez, and cycled from Austin to Anchorage, Alaska for cancer research. He hopes to attend law school in the fall of 2020, but first plans to work in Mallorca during the spring and in Beirut during the summer. But, above all the experiences, studies, organizations, and future plans, he has cherished and embraced the people that have made them possible.