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INTERVIEW

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Colloquy with Emily Bell at Columbia University on digital platforms, journalism, and society

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Professor Emily Bell encompasses a variety of topics centered on the relationship between digital platforms and journalism, religion, and society. Issues range from the alarming phenomenon of a growing share of the population who avoid news altogether to the resistance of internet companies to regulate speech. Professor Bell is not sparing with her criticism of digital behemoths, defending comprehensive regulation and greater transparency in their algorithms and data. She talks at length about the seismic consequences of the technological revolution for journalism and the challenges in finding a sustainable business model for the news media. When it comes to religion, she points out that churches have an ally in digital platforms, which can be used to disseminate their messages far and wide. Nevertheless, she warns against the risk of jeopardizing ethical principles when such an alliance lacks critical judgement. Professor Emily Bell is the director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University and an expert on the interplay of communication and technology.

Introduction

Getting hold of Professor Emily Bell is not an easy task. She is often traveling, teaching, coordinating research meetings, and participating in conference calls. Nonetheless, she promptly accepted the invitation to be interviewed by *Church, Communication and Culture*.

Most of Professor Bell's career was spent at the British newspaper *The Guardian*. As director of digital content, Bell was a key figure in one of the most successful efforts by a mainstream media outlet to build an online presence. Not for nothing was she called to head the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at the prestigious Columbia Journalism School. She moved to New York City around ten years ago with her family.

Bell's research focuses on the intersection of technology and journalism. She pays particular attention to economic trends in digital journalism, the changing technological environment, and the corresponding cultural shifts. All those themes are at the center of this interview: news, society and trust; the role and influence of digital platforms; the church and digital technologies; the social turmoil brought about by the internet, among others. Bell has a cheerful and kind personality, but she does not shy away from making a strong case against the worst instincts in Silicon Valley.

News, society and trust

In one of your recent articles, you have written about the growing phenomenon of the 'never-newsers', or news avoiders (Bell 2019a). Why are people avoiding the news?

There is so much more content now that is not news. You can encounter all types of media and never cross paths with news if you do not want to. There are also people who actively do not seek out news because they find it overwhelming. That inspired the *slow news* movement. Executives like James Harding decided to leave the BBC to set up a slow news outlet called *Tortoise* (https://www.tortoisemedia.com/.), in part because he himself felt overwhelmed by the news cycle and saw something unhealthy about it.

I have a slightly different view. I think it is a privileged position to feel overwhelmed by the news. Outside Europe and North America, there are plenty of places where we observe a shortage of news. We also see local news fading in our own communities. In addition to that, part of the population is oblivious to the news cycle not by choice but by design: by the design of algorithms that target users who are more likely to stay connected if they are viewing entertainment rather than news.

The phenomenon of 'never-newsers' is also connected to the fragmentation of audiences. Again, either by choice or by design, we see slightly different things at slightly different times. More and more people will not share a collective experience of news. That has enormous consequences for journalism and the pursuit of viable business models. We are getting into a post-broadcast world that we have not even begun to understand. The present moment is particularly puzzling when it comes to politics: it is enmeshed in the news cycle and also designed to drive the news cycle.

In that context, we talk a lot about distrust of the media as another reason for 'never-newsers'. I am wary of the terminology used around trust. It is a difficult metric to attribute value to. When levels of trust are low, people certainly become more sceptical of news, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. Very high trust can be as problematic as very low trust. My experience as a news executive at *The Guardian* was that our readers had high trust in us but low trust in other news brands. At *The Daily Mail*, their readers had high trust in them and low trust in *The Guardian*. In the aggregate, one can say that there was no shortfall of trust in the media as a whole.

Of course, there is a range of acceptable levels of trust in the media: not too high, but not too low. For some people, trust levels have dropped below the minimum threshold. When that happens, people avoid news because they feel they know enough about the inner workings of the media to say: 'I don't think they are telling me the

truth.' At the same time, they have a hard time understanding their own place in the world. They are facing enormous disruption: finance, climate, migrations, and all sorts of things. It does not help that we have all this information at our fingertips and, on the other hand, there seems to loom existential threats and the unknown. People get discouraged and disoriented. They do not feel that it is worth reading the news. That is a problem for all of us because we do need shared facts.

Especially in liberal democracies where one of the premises is that you have a public conversation that encompasses everyone …

Debate around shared facts enables us to manage self-governance. That is why the news media is so important. But the media is not alone. We focus on the problems of the press because journalists are egocentric: we think of ourselves as victims of this process and also the ones who can fix it. Nevertheless, the media is just part of a larger ecosystem that is changing. We have an important role in it. If journalism disappears and people forget the difference between news and political or commercial messages, society will suffer. There will probably be a rise of corruption and oppression. But journalism is not the only institution that stops those scourges. It is a necessary condition, although not sufficient, for the life of democracies.

Other important institutions are suffering from the same lack of trust and engagement. We are undergoing a crisis in the values of Western liberal democracy. We got used to thinking of democracy as the model on the rise. It is not clear anymore. Political philosophers were surprised by how quickly recent democracies, particularly former members of the Soviet bloc, have slid away from democratic norms. We underestimated the fragility of democracy.

What's the role of digital platforms? Are they the cause or just the context for these changes?

They are part of the cause. The speed of processing, the cost of storage, the dynamics of Moore's Law in computation[1] are at the root of this. It is all about moving information, intangible assets and currencies faster and faster. The movements of capital and labour have traditionally defined the growth of democracy. Now they are powered, in one way or another, by engineering and technology. We can identify similarities between the forces that led to the financial collapse [in 2008] and the rise of platforms. It is the same kind of engineering: real time trading, used for credit default options in the former and for ad-tech in the latter.

There is something about speed and connectivity, and how it is being used to create new markets, that does actually spill from online into the real world. Ten years ago, there was a debate whether online activity could influence offline events. Now there is no doubt about it.

Take, for instance, Occupy Wall Street[2]. One decade ago, journalists were looking at it and saying: 'It is not really a movement about anything. We cannot understand those activists in Zuccotti Park and around the world. They do not have a cause.' The movement, with its personalized messages and memes, was entirely appropriate for the new platforms. When I was a student activist, we had to focus on one message because we had

15 seconds on the evening news. Occupy Wall Street's personalization was made possible by the dynamics of digital platforms. A similar thing could be said about the Arab Spring.

People from a previous generation would probably remind us that in the wake of those revolutionary movements there was a backlash of the worst kind of commercialism and authoritarianism. That is also true. No one would look at American society today and say that we have healed the economic division. What we actually got is a set of economic and communication devices which sort people out into the highly desirable/very monetizable and the uncreditworthy.

Some historians argue that nothing is new, that these disruptions resemble previous explosions in new communication technologies. Optimists would add: 'The internet is just like TV and radio. They triggered the same moral panic but it turned out to be just fine. Lots of people now have access to things they would not have otherwise.' In these moments, the argument goes, there is always intense debate to figure out how to react to the new technology. The British government, for instance, felt sufficiently threatened by the development of radio to create the BBC as a central authority to discourage pamphleteers such as those who had disrupted the political process during the First World War.

Someone could also take a different perspective and argue that there is something genuinely new about the internet. Among other things, it is less well-defined, barely regulated, global, and capable of changing its shape in unprecedented ways. According to that view, we are still finding out the degree to which the internet differs from other media, but the differences are apparent. I agree with that view.

One important difference between old and new media is the illegibility of the new. In the past, you could scrutinize even State media: you knew who controlled it and why it was giving you certain messages. Those were simple and understandable structures. New media is illegible even to experts and the people who built it. And it is done deliberately so.

Again, we can draw a parallel with the financial crisis: even people who had built those trading systems that led to the collapse did not foresee how they would play out in real life. Likewise, nobody in Cupertino, Mountain View, or Menlo Park[3] seemed to realize that, if you encourage people to engage on a digital platform with no commitments to democratic norms or social cohesion, the results can be absolutely disastrous. Internet companies talk about communities, democracy and connectivity all the time. They have no idea what those terms mean, the difficulties of creating the realities meant by them, and what to do when things go awry. We have now a series of catastrophes that demonstrate how deaf they were to the warning signs and how poorly they understood their own role in it.

As a further example: Anyone familiar with the economics of the news industry knows that journalism is expensive because a lot of it is about what you do not publish. Proper curation and moderation have a cost and are hard to scale up. It is easier and cheaper to publish absolutely everything. That is the stance of the platforms despite the utterly predictable social cost that this choice brings about.

How would you describe the impact of online platforms?

First, they undermined the economic basis of modern media by dramatically changing the dominant advertising model in a very short time span. In terms of other media

effects, they have certainly had a profound effect on shaping society, but it is difficult to truly understand those changes if platforms do not release their data.

Internet companies take a cavalier attitude to privacy when it comes to tracking user behavior. At the same time, they are incredibly disingenuous about the arguments around protecting their own data. Facebook has a new incident every week: 'Oops, we actually let this app access all of your data. We should not have done it. We are really sorry!' Meanwhile, they reject the most reasonable requests: 'We cannot possibly let journalists and researchers see this data.'

Many questions on important societal issues – such as unemployment, automation, finance, and news consumption – converge around technology and are theoretically knowable. It is a scandal that they go unanswered because researchers and journalists have no access to data. In twenty years' time, people will be astonished by how much data around behaviour platforms managed to hang on to, use for their own benefit, and shield from public scrutiny.

Downsizing and taxing digital platforms

This brings up the issue of internet regulation. In your opinion, what is the ideal scenario?

I am European. In Europe, when we see things, we want to regulate them. That is not a bad instinct. Look at post-war Europe and the United States during the New Deal. Both Europe and the United States were leaving tragic events behind: the Second World War and the Great Depression, respectively. Both underwent reconstruction projects that were incredibly successful. The institutional building during those years was phenomenal. In Great Britain, for instance, the National Health Service and public broadcasting were created. Regulation was instrumental in that success.

That brings to mind [Princeton professor and sociologist] Paul Starr (2006)'s concept of constitutive choices: those consequential and often tumultuous moments in history in which countries are forced to make a series of choices and those decisions shape society for years to come.

Inspired by Milton Friedman, free market economics, Reaganomics, and Thatcher, we decided in the 1980s that regulation in general and media regulation in particular were bad things. The American government acted accordingly and deregulated radio and TV[4]. In those years, there was a tight regulatory framework to be undone. Now there is none.

Consider the case of political ads on Facebook. There is no regulation, not even boundaries that anyone would agree with. We are at the mercy of the 'terms and conditions' of a private company with no oversight. It is mind-blowing.

Many people will say: 'I'm very happy to give up my data to get faster access to these incredible services.' Should we allow people to make that kind of decision? Neither they, nor we, nor Google, nor anyone really understands what the surrender of that data will mean in ten years' time. Platforms have changed so much since day one. They are not just larger and faster. They play a completely different role from their original one. There is no reason to think they will stand still from now on. When we regulate, we are invited to think about the consequences down the road.

Right now, we see traditional media institutions being swept aside and replaced by a completely untamed market. In that context, we can benefit from some analogies. For instance, Gresham's law in economics — in the absence of regulation, bad money drives out good money — can also be applied to speech: in the absence of regulation, bad speech drives out good speech. When it comes to platforms, you cannot combat bad speech with good speech alone because bad actors will employ automated tools to endlessly populate social media feeds with their individualized messages. We need regulation which clearly states: any automated strategy that drowns out or frightens people is wrong.

Critics of internet regulation often invoke the First Amendment and its protection of freedom of speech. Another analogy might illuminate this argument too. The Second Amendment enshrines the right to bear arms. However, that right looked very different when the Constitution was promulgated. Now we have bump stocks and semi-automatic weapons. They have already increased the lethality of mass shootings. Most Americans will agree that restrictions on that kind of modern weaponry do not contradict the Second Amendment. Similarly, the authors of the First Amendment did not know anything about the proliferation of bots, deep fakes, or automated speech. If they did, they would certainly see them as threats to free speech. Accordingly, regulations against bots and digital manipulation do not go against the First Amendment. They protect it.

I do think the need for regulation is indisputable. Nonetheless, some experts, particularly in the United States, still think that self-regulation is better than government regulation. That is a problem because regulation has to start in the United States or is not going to work.

How to start? What are the concrete first steps?

First, we should break the map. The platforms are just too big. It is absurd that a privately held entity like Google knows more about a certain population than its democratically-elected government. Again, not everyone agrees with me. [CUNY professor and media critic] Jeff Jarvis (2013, 2019), for instance, would argue that it is much better that Google owns all that data because, if they do bad things with it, people will just stop using their services. In my opinion, that is simply not true. We have passed the point where there can be competition. It is virtually impossible to challenge Google in the short term. The development of artificial intelligence is entirely dependent on processing power and data. You cannot do that in your garage. The reasoning should be: if data is going to be important for centuries, we cannot allow only one or two companies to control it. We should start by breaking the map.

Then we should focus on oversight. Utility-style regulation offers a good framework for that. Think of water or the electrical grid. Private companies provide water but the government constantly monitors water quality. Private companies run the electrical grid but they are obliged to supply everybody according to predetermined parameters.

In that case, what kind of parameters would you establish for digital platforms?

We need a multipronged approach for regulation. A basic requirement could be guaranteeing universal access.

I also like [Yale professor and legal scholar] Jack Balkin's (2015) idea of treating internet companies as information fiduciaries. They would be prevented from using the information they collect against their users' interests. Platforms would have a legal obligation to be trustworthy in a way that resembles the fiduciary duties of doctors, lawyers and accountants.

In addition to that, we could require platforms to publish their accounts as public companies do. Here, we touch the issue of transparency. Transparency is not about overwhelming people with decontextualized data. It has to provide real knowledge and insight: why are they doing this? who is in charge of what? who else is involved? how much are they spending? Just as an example, I have been looking at the Google Transparency Project (which I know it is funded by a rival of Google[5]). They have collected data on how much Google spends with journalism projects. Our own research at the Tow Center confirms their figures. Google funds lots of initiatives at a relatively low cost: it spends around one hundred million dollars a year. The number of projects is well over 3,000. Looking at the names of individuals, institutions and academics who received funding from Google, we observe networks of influence coalescing. I am always curious to see who is organizing meetings to discuss misinformation. Sometimes I notice that 50% or even 70% of the participants are funded by Google. It is unlikely that they will have an open conversation about the responsibility of platforms. That is why we need oversight to understand how those companies exert their influence and where they spend their money.

In one of your articles in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Bell 2018), you proposed to tax big digital platforms and use that money to invest in journalism, particularly in civic media.

When you talk about journalism and how to preserve it, there are two schools of thought.

The first one says: 'Let the market decide how much journalism is going to survive.' In practical terms, that means that lots of people will go without proper reporting on schools, health care, water quality, etc. That is the current approach.

The second school of thought says that you have to support journalism and recreate it in places where it is not economically viable, particularly at the local level. That requires money. John Thornton, an American entrepreneur who founded the Texas Tribune with other journalists, a successful data-driven local news operation in Austin, points out that, if we subsidized journalism with the same amount of funding that is commonly raised by ballets and operas in the United States, we could replace a significant amount of newsrooms that have been lost.

You do not need a huge amount of money to get some basic reporting back into many places, but the money has to come from somewhere. For me, it seems completely logical that companies that benefit the most from media content — the platforms — should be the ones that foot the bill. Google wants to organize the world of information, right? Then, it should fund those who create the information that will be organized. It is not a stretch.

Some people say: 'It is not the platforms' fault.' It does not matter. We are beyond the point of finding culprits. We have to ask ourselves: how can we introduce a

progressive type of taxation on platforms that will give resources to news media which will benefit people who do not have the money to pay for it? I am not worried about the readers of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, or the *Financial Times*. Not even the readers of *The Guardian*, where we tried to keep it free for readers. I am worried about readers who do not have access to news at the local level, who do not see journalists in their own communities, or do not trust what those journalists report.

Google is very keen on automating the news. For instance, they have a partnership with the UK Press Association called Project Radar. It is about automating reports coming out of courts (BBC News 2017). On the one hand, that sounds revolutionary and a good way of creating stories where you do not have human reporters. But let's think for a moment: the criminal justice system does not deserve human reporters but the White House does. Why? Maybe because we do not see a problem in offering automated content to the poor while providing good old human judgment to the elites who are able to pay for it.

Imagine if the Admissions Office at Columbia University announced that student applications would be analyzed by an algorithm that would make admission decisions with no human intervention. There would be an uproar. Well, that actually happens if you are a poor kid applying for elementary school in some parts of the United States. Meanwhile, overprivileged kids can rest assured that they will get as much human intervention as they deserve.

I do not buy this desire to automate everything. Of course, it creates efficiencies in news, but the corollary of that is fewer journalists. The *Youngstown Vindicator* – not necessarily a paper that everybody liked – shut down in August 2019 (Benton 2019). It was the last newspaper in an Ohio town of around 65,000 inhabitants, with a metropolitan area of more than half a million people. The newsroom had 122 journalists. It was replaced by an experiment that Google is co-funding which provides local news with a newsroom of only four people. A typical example of 'technoptimism' that has to be challenged: if it is only four people, it is not going to work.

We need people from the community to think about which stories have to be told and to keep an institutional memory. Maybe journalists will look like community managers in the future. At the moment, any debate on this is a moot point because there is no funding anyway. Moving forward, I think the money should come from tax on platforms.

Let me play the devil's advocate. What would you answer to someone who says: 'state and local news are boring … why read them when I have Netflix?'

I watch more Netflix than I read core reports from Queens … that's for sure!
First, attention is not everything. There is a misconception that journalism needs to be read every day by everyone in order to have an impact. Not true. Let me give you a couple of examples from my experience at *The Guardian*. A reporter called Ian Cobain published a series of investigations into the use of torture by the MI5 (Cobain 2009). It was sufficiently scandalous to get laws changed but did not attract many readers. Understandably, people did not want to know about someone having his fingernails pulled out. Another horrible case of child neglect was powerful in the headlines, but

had low page traffic. Again, people did not want to read the actual details of a child dying due to neglect. Nevertheless, in both cases readers wanted us to report on it.

On top of that, we cannot forget that journalism constitutes a permanent record. In Stalinist Russia, they literally cut pieces out of photos to erase the memory of purged figures. Now it is even easier. Digital files can be erased in the blink of an eye. At the beginning of the Trump administration, data activists scrambled to download everything they could find on government Websites. They were afraid of public records going missing and rightly so. If you control the switch, you can delete everything. Journalism serves as an independent public record that cannot be wiped out so easily.

We often overlook the fact that entertainment and news used to constitute a bundle and the entertainment side paid for the news side. Now publishers can reassemble the bundle to be maximally profitable. That means more entertainment and less (or none) news. We return to the business model problem. In free market America, journalism is meant to be for profit, but it should be seen as a public good. In the near future, we need to shift perceptions of journalism from a market-driven good to a public good. With the downturn in ad revenue, I do not see an alternative.

Not long ago, I heard a horrifying prediction from someone who works in advertisement: 'In the future, all messages available for free will have some kind of commercial, political or religious interest underwriting them. People will have to pay for unbiased content.' That is not far from our current reality. The most expensive information is also the most high-quality and up-to-date one: real-time market data. In any case, it is hard to justify certain sectors of society having access to better information and, in turn, leveraging their privilege. It drives inequality and journalism is not vocal enough about it. We need to figure out how people can have free access to high quality information.

Platforms and religion

Traditional social networks, like the ones from organized religions, are being somehow replaced or overshadowed by digital platforms. How do you see the future of these traditional social networks facing this new wave?

The Catholic Church is probably the oldest messaging platform that exists and it has been predicated on a one-to-many design. Broadcast has been like that ever since. With the rise of digital platforms, that paradigm is being replaced by a many-to-many design based on personalization. Both religious and news organizations — which are not religions even though we like to think they are — face a similar question: how much do you integrate with the disrupting influences? how much do you withdraw to isolate yourself from them?

But there is an important difference between religious and news organizations. Platforms are enormously good at delivering real-time messages and they are in direct competition with news organizations in that regard. Churches and other religious organizations are not in direct competition with the platform's business model. If anything, they can use it for their own benefit. Platforms amplify their message.

At the same time, religious, political and news organizations share a common ethical question: 'How can we use platforms to serve our mission without betraying our

values?' In a concrete level, for instance, someone could ask: 'Should we allow our journalists — or priests, in the case of a religious organization — to have private WhatsApp groups (256 participants max) where they can give slightly different messaging?' Politicians went all in: 'This is great! We can personalize our messages with little or no scrutiny.' Religious and news organizations tend to be more cautious.

I can also see a shared problem for pre-existing religious and political movements. Now it is easier to challenge two-party systems by rallying online supporters and creating a new third party. Religious movements tend to be more socially cohesive than political movements but, for a tech-savvy religious leader, it is likewise easier to start a new church now than in any time in the past.

There is another challenge for religious organizations, especially the [Catholic] Church. Platforms are designed to elevate individuals while suppressing brands. Companies have to pay a lot of money to elevate their brands. Since the Church prizes a central identity — a 'brand' — that might be a source of tension. Journalism is struggling with a similar question: how to tie back to a central body or channel a collection of very charismatic individuals who perform well on messaging platforms?

On the other hand, churches have one thing that is much sought after nowadays: physical contact and meeting places. In that sense, they can be complementary to the disembodied experience on digital platforms. People crave meeting in real life. If you told me 30 years ago that there would be queues around art galleries in London, I would not have believed you. People visited those galleries because they were heavily subsidized. Otherwise, they would be empty. Something has changed since then. The director of the British Museum told me that he participated in a series with the BBC that presented the history of the world through 100 objects. In one episode, he spoke about a tiny artefact: a Carolingian carved bookmark. After that, he decided to take it to a book festival. He was mobbed by people in the festival: 'Can I see it? Can I touch it?' The Church has direct experience of this, of how people converge in spaces that have significance and sometimes tangible icons.

More than a challenge to religions' ethics, do you not think that the new digital environment poses a challenge to religions' authority?

That is an interesting question: to what extent pre-existing institutions become unfashionable in this new environment? I think traditional media and religions are vulnerable to the same kind of charismatic — and sometimes authoritarian and untrue — messaging that thrives in digital platforms: 'Do not believe the priests! Do not believe the journalists! Believe me.' That is why it is in the public interest to demand transparency of social media algorithms. They have allowed that kind of discourse to become so influential.

At the same time, if there is one thing that we learned from the disruption of news media is that durability seems to reside with long-lasting institutions rather than with newcomers. Twenty years ago, everyone predicted: 'Forget *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, the *BBC* … Digital natives are the future.' Then we saw the weakness of new media outlets. They can do well for a short period of time, but they lack the stamina and resilience of incumbents to survive in the new environment. To the extent

that we can apply this logic to religious organizations, we can expect that durable institutions like the Catholic Church are well positioned to weather the storm.

Of course, the most successful media organizations have been the ones with a lot of resources to invest in reforming their processes, improving their journalism, and making themselves more accountable and reflective of people's interests and concerns. In a certain way, digital platforms had a positive effect on them. They were challenged to be better. Long-lasting religious organizations will probably undergo the same kind of institutional shake-up if they want to keep their relevance in the digital age. In any case, there is a lot of potential for incumbents to do well if they take the necessary steps to adapt. Meanwhile, it has become harder for non-incumbents to find a place in the sun.

As an aside, it has been interesting to observe that digital platforms themselves are going from being disruptive to suffering disruption. The attack is coming from talkboards like 4chan and 8chan: micro-social networks swarming with users where everything is permitted and that often become a breeding ground for anarchy and violence. As a result, the main platforms are starting to behave like incumbents. They are encouraging and reaching out to the same traditional media organizations they thought we could get rid of. After all, when you turn into an incumbent, you become more sympathetic towards other incumbents.

Mainstream media has been the watchdog for institutions such as the Catholic Church. The scandal of child sexual abuse by priests is a case in point. Today, with the crowded media environment, who are the watchdogs? Do the platforms have a role?

Platforms do not report and they have absolutely resisted the idea of becoming accountability platforms. They always say: 'We are not the news media. We are not governance systems.' When they play that role, they do so by accident rather than by design.

Despite all that, I do think the platforms might change their strategy in the near future. Up to this point, everyone assumed that they would be broken up into smaller commercial units. Now, I am not so sure. They might propose a bargain: 'We will take a lot more governance and civic responsibility if you leave our scale alone, if we are allowed to continue being these digital juggernauts.'

They have a very special relationship with Washington. We have seen this before with United Fruit in South America in the 1950s, for instance (Kenny 2019). The American government values these outgrowths of soft power that are very active in other economies. The platforms are also spending a lot of money on lobbying. They really want to integrate themselves into the fabric of society and governance in order to make it impossible to break them down into smaller units.

Even so, it has to be said that platforms are not all bad. Their amplification effect allows skilled and well-intentioned journalists to have a greater impact in a much shorter period of time. The child abuse scandals that you mentioned took several years to come to light. Now everything is faster thanks to the platforms. Take the #MeToo movement. Its foundation was not people gossiping on social media, but quite hard reporting that was then amplified by the platforms. Or the current scandal at the MIT

Media Lab [for receiving money from sex offender Jeffrey Epstein]: a big institution under a lot of pressure after a few months of reporting and social media uproar (Farrow 2019). Surprisingly, journalism's impact has not diminished. If anything, it has grown. The caveat is that it is now residing in a smaller number of organizations. We are probably seeing an age where only a handful of influential media outlets will be able to amplify their stories and play the watchdog role.

An educational failure

The tech industry tends toward indifference bordering on contempt for the past. In a recent New Yorker's piece, pioneering autonomous vehicle engineer Anthony Levandowski was quoted as saying, 'The only thing that matters is the future. (…) I don't even know why we study history. It's entertaining I guess — the dinosaurs and the Neanderthals and the industrial revolution and stuff like that. But what already happened doesn't really matter. You don't need to know the history to build on what they made. In technology, all that matters is tomorrow' (Duhigg 2018). In your opinion, what is wrong with Silicon Valley?

It has to be a failing in some aspects of the education system. I can talk for hours about both the brilliance and the shortcomings of the American education system. That cluster around Stanford with its venture capitalists is especially prone to this kind of distortion. The education for excellence and achievement is shaped by the economy. America is the purest expression of capitalism that you can experience anywhere in the world. All the incentives are commercial and commerce is not a great lover of history. Capitalism only cares about profitability. It does not care about the lessons of the past.

First of all, 'the past does not matter' is the kind of thing that sounds great on a cereal box or on a pair of sneakers … but it is simply not true. Only silly people who have been indoctrinated can say things like that. It is a performative bravado about how you are going to conquer the world in new ways, very much like investment bankers in the 1980's. When I left college, the smartest kids who were not members of left-wing organizations went to work for merchant banks. Investment banking was how you went from a poor background to an enormous wealth if you were smart enough. Now it is software engineering. You see the same characteristics, the same focus on making money. And you are surrounded by people who validate that view of the world.

I have given a couple of talks to computer science students at Columbia University. We are usually tempted to speak to them on their own terms: what technologies are working and how they may be applied to the newsroom. More often than not, I resist that temptation and talk to them about journalism. I role-play with them: 'A story breaks. Person A says X on Twitter or Facebook. Her identity is obscured but person B reveals who she is … ' and so on. I use real case studies where people ended up killing each other like in the genocide in Myanmar (Stecklow 2018). Then I open for discussion. The students' first reaction is: 'You cannot say that this is technology's fault. It is people's fault.' My answer to them: 'You (as a software engineer) have designed the platform. You designed a platform that has no retrieval, deletion latency. It is working the way you built it for. This is your fault.'

I was talking to Julia Hirschberg. She is a fantastic woman and was the Chair of the Computer Science Department. I asked her: 'How is that they do not know their role in all these changes?' She answered: 'That is why we bring people like you to talk to them … they never hear these kinds of things.' If you look at papers written by computer science students, you see that they are incentivized to get the code right. They are not incentivized to think critically afterwards: 'I got the code right but … should I deploy it?' There is no incentive for a student to say: 'I have read about the history of the relationship between Silicon Valley and the Defense Industry. Now I understand better the consequences of what we are doing here.'

Meanwhile, American universities are shutting history and language departments. I have got three kids. The first one studied political science. By current standards, an absolutely useless degree. The second one, even worse, is studying classics. Both careers introduce you to an amazing world. Everything is there. If you listen to archaeologists talking about material cultures and how it relates to space exploration, it is mind-blowing. But those courses are dwindling. Everybody is going into computer science, statistics and mathematics and those courses have not caught up with the need to provide tools for critical thinking.

In the past, engineers created systems that were then played into a political culture that was controlled by liberal arts graduates. Defense mechanisms built in Silicon Valley would be arbitrated by politicians who studied literature at Williams College. Now, technocracy is running everything. The system is running faster than liberal arts can understand or keep up with. That is a problem because engineers tend to optimize one thing and forget the rest. Workers at Uber would probably have a different view on how to develop their software if they understood urbanization, the history of the car industry, the dynamics of migrant labour, and the social outcomes of the gig economy. But they are not incentivized to learn all that because it does not maximize profit. They are not stupid. They are really smart people who have been told that to think in this narrow and superficial way is not only OK but desirable. And nobody contradicts it.

To see what I mean read [CUNY professor and media theorist] Douglas Rushkoff (2016)'s *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus* or just visit San Francisco. San Francisco is a shocking demonstration of what is happening at both ends of society. Go to Market Street near Twitter's headquarters. The most highly paid young people in the world come in and out of those shiny buildings, alongside squalor, homelessness, opioid addiction, people literally shitting out in the streets and sleeping on cardboard. The insularity of it is astonishing: how you can avoid a world that is right there, how you can just step into an Uber that takes you to your unmixed neighborhood, how you never have to engage with the misery around you. The City of London and Wall Street are smaller and somehow contained in big cities that have other things. The Valley is different. It is just one thing. And it attracts the most talented people in the world. That reinforces this unsettling culture.

Privacy, transparency and speech moderation

Going back to privacy issues, how do you see the need to moderate conversations?

I have been looking at what platforms have done to fight misinformation, like the new oversight board at Facebook (Horwitz and Seetharaman 2019). Around 10,000

moderators have been added by YouTube and Facebook. They are also investing in moderating algorithms through fact checking (Bell 2019b). However, it is a small investment compared to the overall size of those companies and the urgency of the problem.

Mark Zuckerberg explicitly said that his companies are going to tackle it in two different ways. First, they are going to promote ephemeral stories: content that you post and then disappear. Second, they are going to break conversations up into smaller groups. In a certain sense, we are seeing the end of open systems where you can look at what everybody is saying on Facebook or Twitter. In the new era, it is much harder to penetrate or understand what is going on in small private groups. To some extent, it amounts to an admission: 'Since we have not figured out how to moderate the spread of misinformation, we are going to sweep it under the carpet.'

They are building a system that is even less transparent. You can already see the narrative to justify the change: 'You do not want the government eavesdropping outside your living room. You do not want the CIA showing up in your church. The same holds for these small internet groups.' Nevertheless, there are conversations that ought to be open. We should be able to see what advertisers and politicians are showing to people. Otherwise, they can even disguise themselves and their intentions in order to manipulate people. Nobody would be able to report them because, from the outside, you cannot see what is going on in those private groups.

Just to give you an example, we have been looking into the 2019 Indian election on WhatsApp, a particularly opaque social network owned by Facebook (Bengani 2019). There are hundreds of millions of messages. Some of them were sent by well-meaning entities. Others, by bad actors that are spreading misinformation. Those misleading messages are not produced at human scale: they are clearly seeded by bots.

The platforms dream of finding a way to sort people out into groups where everyone agrees with everyone and gets along well. That would make the issue of moderation go away.

By reinforcing the echo chamber …

As we have already discussed, they do not read history books. They are oblivious to the unintended consequences of their decisions. Journalism cannot scale because it is so culturally specific to an area or particular demographics. Moderation is also culturally specific but the platforms think they can scale it up everywhere. Why? Because they do not understand culture.

We often forget that Google and Facebook are advertising businesses. They will do whatever it takes to extract the right data from people to carry on the most effective ad platform. They do not care about the quality of the conversation. They do not care about journalism. They care about their business. I do not want to sound cynical and I do not blame them. I just think they made all sorts of empty statements about their role in the world. Facebook says: 'We want to connect people to make the world a better place.' What does that even mean?

The bright side of this is that we are having conversations about the nature of humanity, communication, and connectivity that we have not had for a generation. The 1950s and the 1960s were not a golden age of theorizing about communication.

You had a few good thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas and James Carey. Some people say that communications theory is going to be a booming research field because we have experienced the digital revolution without any true theoretical framework to understand it. We are looking for guideposts to think about its effects on society and what to do with it.

It is similar to the industrial revolution, an analogous technical disruption that radically changed how people lived. Peasants left the countryside and went to towns. Everything was decided around the demands of the ongoing revolution, exactly like now. Commercial creativity was at its height for 40 years or maybe a bit longer. Then, for the following 100 years, people were dealing with wars and social policies. The period of social policy went roughly from 1920 to 1970. It was all about clearing up in the wake of the industrial revolution.

With the technological and digital revolution, we have not had this second phase of social policies yet. It will not be just about government. All civil society stakeholders — media, universities, churches, etc — will have to figure out what this revolution means and how to react to it. During the industrial revolution, there was an Act of Parliament that stated that 'children should no longer go up chimneys' (Strange 1982). We have not had that moment, as a society, that goes: 'Why are we putting children up to chimneys? That seems like a very bad idea.' In our case, it will be more like: 'Facial recognition? Why did we allow it?' You can feel the first signs of it, but we have not got neither a policy response nor a response from civil society yet.

It is such a profound change that one can underestimate it. The disruption it meant for political movements is a sign that it is fundamentally changing how people live their lives. After the Cold War, capitalism became the total dominant ideology. To some extent, it still is but with unexpected turns. China is a free market that is not free, for instance. It is state capitalism. Suddenly we have unanticipated shifts in power that are caused by technology. When Vladimir Putin says that 'whoever owns artificial intelligence will run the world', he is overdramatic but not wrong. There is something in there which is fundamentally true. We have not got to that phase yet and we talk about it as a theory. When it hits us, our present moment will feel like a prelude.

As you can see, I am not, generally speaking, a very optimistic person. I tend to be quite pessimistic. But I think pessimists are quite cheerful at the moment because we feel we have been proved right: 'I told you! I told you that it was going to be awful!'

Notes

1. Moore's Law is a term that originated around 1970 stating that overall processing power for computers doubles every two years.
2. Occupy Wall Street is a protest movement that began in September 2011, in Zuccotti Park, next to New York City's Wall Street financial district. It opposes social and economic inequality and the undue influence of corporations on government, particularly from the financial services sector.
3. Cupertino, Mountain View and Menlo Park are, respectively, the localities of the headquarters of Apple, Google, and Facebook.

4. In 1981, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deregulated radio by eliminating programming guidelines, commercial limits, ascertainment, and the program logging requirement. In 1984, the commission deregulated TV in much the same manner it had radio. In 1987, the FCC repealed the fairness doctrine (Waldman 2011).
5. On August 2016, Fortune published that Oracle is one of the funders of the Google Transparency Project (Roberts 2016).

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