Antisocial Media:
How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy

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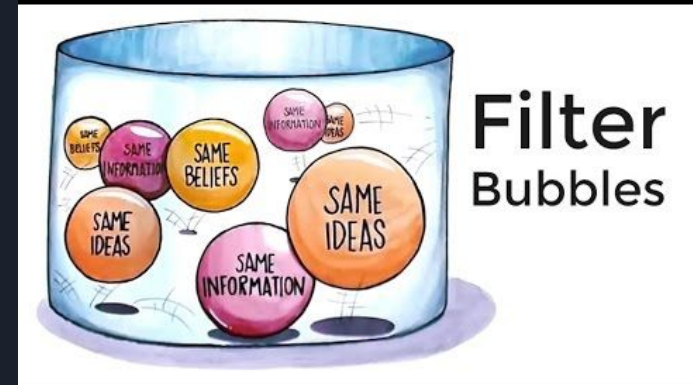
Introduction

Nature of the Problem

- Facebook's mission: "To make the world more open and connected"
- Simple yet powerful truth: "The problem with Facebook is Facebook"
  - 2.2 billion users -- allowed to post indiscriminately
  - Algorithms that favor highly charged content
  - Central source of revenue: microtargeting advertisements
  - No serious competitors

Introduction
How Facebook's structure can be harmful

- Easy spread of misinformation
  - Information pollution ("fake news")
  - Visually indistinguishable posts on news feed
  - Facilitates the erosion of truth
- Amplification of emotional content
  - Explicitly engineered to promote items that generate strong reactions
  - Extremism leads to higher rate of engagements
- Filter bubbles
  - Term coined by internet activist Eli Pariser
  - Feedback loop of user-preferred content
  - Social circles usually align with user preferences
  - Filter bubbles + propaganda = toxicity

Introduction
Facebook's connection to politics

"Wow, that internet argument completely changed my fundamental belief system," said no one, ever.

- Democratic republics require motivation and deliberation
  - Motivation
    - Engaged citizens to coordinate their knowledge, messages, and actions
    - Opposing forces able to compete for attention/support within the public sphere
  - Deliberation
    - Forums to host healthy debate
    - Norms through which opponents maintain mutual respect for the process
- Facebook is good for motivation, but not deliberation
 - Structure of posts does not promote healthy discussion

Introduction
Truth, trust, and democracy

- Erosion of truth
  - Those who threaten democracy see truth as "besides the point"
  - Aim is to disrupt the flow of discourse
  - Age of sophistry works against the construct of democracy
  - How do we claim truth?
- What Americans trust
  - Americans trust Google search results more than traditional news outlets
  - Facebook users base trustworthiness on identity of user who posts rather than original source
  - Troubling: Two of the richest global corporations have earned vast reserves of public trust in addition to wealth and influence
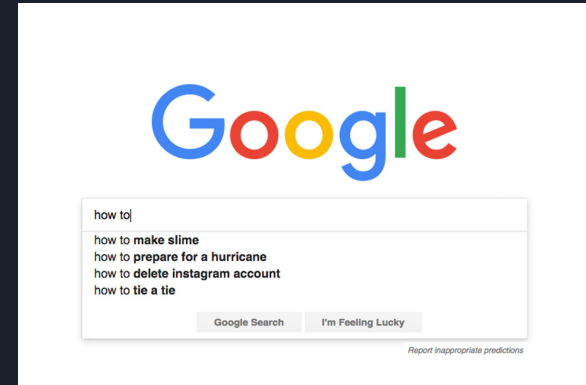
Chapter 1
The Pleasure Machine

- Facebook provides value to users
    - Positive: helps maintain friendships, funny content, etc
    - Negative: may decrease productivity, end relationships
    - Positive aspects usually outweigh negative aspects
- Facebook manipulates its users
    - UI/UX is meant to draw users back
    - Facebook uses data gathered from interactions in aim to maximize user happiness
        - Decreased news content and promoted posts that generated significant comments
        - Sponsored studies which aim of showing that content of news feed can manipulate moods

Chapter 1
The Pleasure Machine

- Users are conditioned through instant, constant, low-level feedback
  - Ex: Posting a picture → tracking likes and comments
  - FB designed to keep users get immersed, disoriented, and rewarded enough to return
- Social stickiness
  - Yields an "attention economy"
    - Likened to gambling → rewards (likes and comments) are intermittent and unpredictable
    - Opaque and unpredictable algorithms of FB and Instagram
  - Zuckerberg's past social engineering
    - HotOrNot & Facemash → people gain pleasure from judging others' pictures

FACEMASH

Were we let in for our looks? No. Will we be judged on them? Yes.

Who's Hotter? Click to Choose.

OR

TURKEY   GERMANY   ITALY   RUSSIA   RANDOM
Home   About   Submit   Rankings

2: The Surveillance Machine

Whether it is internalized or not, **Facebook is the largest and most pervasive surveillance system in history.**

More than 2 billion people, plus millions of organizations are exposed to Facebook using each interaction, preference, and connection to predict and guide future content.

Three types of surveillance Facebook exposes users to:

1. **Commercial/political exploitation**
2. **Tracking through other Facebook users**
3. **Governmental tracking**

2: The Surveillance Machine

Facebook **itself** performs commercial tracking of its users on behalf of its advertising clients.

To profile and track users, "Facebook uses much of the data that users offer: biographical data, records of interactions with others, the text of their posts, location (through Facebook apps on mobile phones equipped with GPS features), and the "social graph"—a map of the relationships among items on Facebook (photos, videos, news stories, advertisements, groups, pages, and the profiles of its 2.2 billion users)."

The unique combination of information allows Facebook to predict user behavior and interests on and off of their platform.

2: The Surveillance Machine

Many other services use Facebook as a "social" component by utilizing the "Open Graph" service.

- How Spotify and other major apps plug into Facebook to show their users what their friends are listening to.
- Obvious boon for clients like Spotify, but for Facebook it is an entirely new layer of data that can be used to make predictions, even if the access is not inherently obvious.
- Exposes users who may have left their Facebook accounts aside to still be tracked by Facebook.

2: The Surveillance Machine

So what?

- Author argues that these actions seem harmless on their own. If Facebook collects data, they can't use it to "police people." Who is getting harmed?

- Facebook agreed for a large portion of time with this mentality. All the data collection was to make their product better. (Dog owners don't want to see cat food ads).

"The chief danger from the Facebook commercial surveillance system lies in the concentration of power."

- No other entity can come close to this much information about the public.

Data can be used for malicious intent by its own users. Facebook profiles can be abused for the purposes of public shaming, harassing, or exposing personal information to outsiders.

Data can be used maliciously by outside corporations and Governments relying on Facebook data.

3: The Attention Machine

Who remembers the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge?

- Started by Matt Lauer and Greg Norman as a dare to donate money to a Florida hospice.
- Posted on Facebook, where many picked it up and dared friends to donate to charities with the same spin.
- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) rose to the forefront among the virality. Eventually over 2.5 million videos circulated Facebook, leading to $98.2 million raised ($2.7 million the year before).

Spectacular success, but what does this say about our society?

- Every dollar going to ALS is a dollar taken from Cancer Research, HIV Treatment, Malaria Prevention.
- No video ever said what ALS was going to do with the funds.
- Should the catchiest, cutest, funniest, most clever posts on social media dictate how financial and political support is garnered?

3: The Attention Machine

Author notes this point as society's transition to the "attention economy."

- "Business focus is largely centered on grabbing user's focus, if only for a brief moment."
- Both users and corporations on social media become "brands."
- On Facebook, everything is an ad, and ads are everything.
  - No clear distinction of what is meant to persuade (vote, buy, donate) with what is meant to entertain or inform.
- Leads to a state of bombardment of content.
  - Many public school systems in US allow corporate ads to target students in exchange for funding. Lockers, hallway walls, etc.
- Few places are now considered safe/sacred from the demands of our attention.

This is a stark departure from the standards of advertising of decades prior.

Author argues that it is **dehumanizing**, treating users as a means to a sale instead of as a person.

3: The Attention Machine

How has Facebook used this to their advantage?

Facebook uses personal data as propaganda to feed advertising.

- Setting up Facebook ad campaign is easy and inexpensive.
- Because of the data Facebook collects, dangerously simple to target very specific types of people (Author uses example of M.D. or Ph.D. in Psychology/Neuroscience from 3 countries that also dislike singer Crystal Gayle).
- Leads to dangerous amount of what Author calls "funnel vision," favoring specific ads over other ads and performing such extensive ad testing on user base.
  - This leads to echo chambers which ultimately narrow a population's field of vision.

This has ultimately led to "political segregation, the fraying of civil discourse, and the erosion of trust in civic institutions."

Author goes on a minor rant at the end of the chapter, arguing that this leads society down a path of the big 5 tech companies making an "Operating System" for our lives, where attention is optional (Google Home, Oculus Rift, iOS, etc.)

4: The benevolent Machine

The original mission of Facebook was to *make the world more open and connected*. **In the IPO letter, Zuckerberg believes that "all we needed was a better way to communicate and to connect." This leads to a few assumptions:**

- There is no downside for connections and communications: what was good for humanity was good for advertisers. What was good for advertisers was good for Facebook shareholders. What was good for Facebook shareholders was good for Facebook employees.

- Bringing people together would make life better. After all, friendship is better than loneliness, knowledge is better than ignorance, and collective action has greater potential to move things than individual actions.

4: The benevolent Machine

Social Engineering in India:

- Facebook launched a service called Internet.org (Free Basics) in India
- "Zero rating": introducing services at zero cost but favor certain type of data streams, mobile services and applications
- **Intension**: help people who cannot afford internet services
- **Drawback**: violate network neutrality and ignore political complexity
- India later resists Facebook
  - They all support data neutrality and grew suspicious that Facebook has the best interest of Indians in mind.
  - Facebook Failed to pay attention to particulars of Indian political economy.
  - Facebook pushed its user to send regulators email
  - Sandberg made comments: "access to digital services can empower poor women to change status."
- **Digital Imperialism:**
  - "Denying world's poorest free partial Internet connectivity when today they have none, for ideological reasons, strike me as morally wrong."
  - And other hate speeches from Facebook officials

4: The benevolent Machine

CSR under a bigger context:

- Under current world definition, companies such as Google and Facebook have extremely high social corporate responsibility.
- In reality, Facebook's missionary venture to spread connectivity and information has failed in India.
- Google's mission statement is similar: "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."
- Probably, there needs to be some qualification on the word "information," or potentially we need to redefine it.

5: The Protest Machine

Facebook is a powerful tool for motivation:

- Successful uprising in Egypt in 2011
- One of the biggest advantages it claims is that it amplify and accelerates movement and and make it easy to alert people who have declared a shared interest in information and plans

BUT...

- Can be easily hijacked by forces that would destabilize a weak state
- Can be easily used as a tool to spread propaganda, monitor the population and coordinate threats for stronger state
- Make dangerous assumption: We believe platforms spread freedom and promote democracy -> everyone using the platform wants freedom and democracy
- They may want recognition, resources, to rule or even to exercise brutality...

5: The Protest Machine

Techno-Narcissism:

- People are not interested in the protest anymore but only interested in whether tools such as Twitter and Facebook are involved in the social movement.
- CNN: "Twitter Revolution: Social Media Explodes over Iran Protest."
- News pay more attention to the idea that people in Iran were using Twitter than to the actual protests itself
- Every news is focus solely on how liberating and enlightening that communicative technologies are
    - People are using our technologies for important purposes, so we feel better

5: The Protest Machine

The reality:

- Social media spurs weak ties but political movements need strong ties
- Only bonds of mutual respect and camaraderie that move people to risk their safety for each other.
- Communication is not conversation (deep deliberation)
- Accept the fact that communicative tools allow people to communicate
- Wael Ghonim (who involved in Egyptian Revolution of 2011):
  - "We failed to build consensus but only the social media amplified the spread of misinformation."
  - 5 challenges: 1. dealing with rumors that confirm people's bias 2. Puncturing echo chambers or filter bubbles 3. Recognizing the humanity of those with whom we interact - through our screens 4. Coding with speed and brevity and the limits they place on deep understanding 5. The way social media favor declaration over deliberation.

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

The 2016 Presidential Election:

- Like Brexit, the 2016 presidential election went against conventional political wisdom.
- The pivotal tool in the election was Facebook
    - Some Facebook ads were meant to dissuade Clinton Voters
    - Others were targeted ads for Trump Supporters and were meant to motivate these voters to show up at the polls.

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

How Trump Won in 2016:

- Between 2010 and 2015, the amount of information being collected on Facebook was enormous:
    - From quizzes to games to facebook integrated applications
    - Users not clearly informed about their information flow
- Facebook contained personal information about a voter's ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation.
- Facebook contributed more than $250 million to the campaign.
- Matched user information from the campaign to their Facebook profile.

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

Alexander Nix

- On September 2016, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica, Alexander Nix, gave a presentation called "The Power of Big Data and Psychographics".
  - Explained how they helped Ted Cruz stay in running for longer than he was expected to stay.
  - Talked about how Steve Bannon, ex-board member of Cambridge Analytica, convinced the founder, Robert Mercer, to help support Trump.

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

OCEAN Model

- Psychographic profiling to determine how to approach a person:
    - O – Openness
    - C - Conscientiousness
    - E – Extroversion
    - A – Agreeableness
    - N – Neuroticism
- Nix claimed that through hundreds of thousands of surveys sent to US citizens, his company was able to create a model to predict the personality of every single adult in the USA.

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

OCEAN Model

	O.C.E.A.N Personality Indicator	
	Low indicator	**High Indicator**
Openness	Practical, sceptical, shoes away from new	Love new, intellectually curious, creative, adventurous
Conscientious	Easy going, relaxed, spontaneous, not many rules	Disciplined, efficient, organised, responsible
Extroversion	Likes solitary time, shy, reserved, quiet, independent	Outgoing, enthusiastic, active, novelty seeking
Agreeableness	Uncooperative, antagonistic, suspicious	Cooperative, kind, affectionate, friendly
Neuroticism	Not easily bothered, secure, emotionally resilient	Tense, moody, anxious, sensitive, prone to negative

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

Michal Kosinski

- Former researcher at the University of Cambridge
- Found that Facebook users were willing to participate in "harmless" personality quizzes.
    - This paved the road to getting enough information for the OCEAN model used by Cambridge Analytica.
    - Kosinski created an application that ran inside Facebook which users would allow permission to scrape information off their profile.

Chapter 6: The Politics Machine

David Karpf

- Political scientist who claimed that Cambridge Analytica has no evidence that they "solved the practical challenges of applying psychometrics to voter behavior."
- Compared the work Cambridge Analytica did to vaporware.
- Nix and Cambridge Analytica distanced themselves from any impactful work they might have contributed to Brexit or Trump's campaign.
- The story shifts to questioning the legality and ethics of Cambridge Analytica's work.

Chapter 7: The Disinformation Machine

Political Ads on Facebook

- Alex Stamos, former head of security at Facebook, found nearly 3,000 ads worth nearly $100,000 likely associated with accounts operating out of Russia.
  - Later revealed that Russian operatives put up event pages in order to increase attendance at anti-immigrant rallies in the U.S.
- Political ads are treated like commercial advertisements by Facebook who hold data about those who *bought* the political ads in strict confidence like "trade secrets."
  - Though less privacy for users?

Chapter 7: The Disinformation Machine

Spread of Disinformation

- Bots and other forms of disinformation are spreading across countries like the Philippines, India, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and Russia.
- Each form of disinformation has a different purpose
  - Generate revenue, spread political influence, generate debate, etc.
- Ecosystem of disinformation
  - Can start on easy to publish sites such as Reddit and 4Chan
  - Videos on YouTube are redistributed on Twitter and Facebook
  - "News" sites that take just about anything (BuzzFeed) don't help

Chapter 7: The Disinformation Machine

Authoritarian Playbook

- Katy Pearce, a scholar studying social media use in post-Soviet states claims that an authoritarian regime can exploit Facebook in many ways:
  - Use it to organize counter-protest movements
  - Shift the opinion of public debate to their favor
  - Manage citizen complaints on social media without direct appeal
  - Coordinate elites to rally support
  - Attack and keep surveillance on opponents.
- "Facebook does not favor hatred. But hatred favors Facebook."

Conclusion: The Nonsense Machine

- Facebook works as a collection of machines that contribute to its power
  - The effect of these machines often combine to create unintended consequences
- "Facebook is simply too large and the variety of human depravity too vast for the company to deploy enough people or computer code to anticipate and regulate the misbehavior of millions."
- "But as anti-rational, authoritarian, nationalist movements gain strength, enabled by Facebook, the prospects for the necessary movements and deliberation get more remote every year...It's getting dark--quickly."