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**Following @Virtue:
Social Media, American Democracy, and the Quest for the Good Life**

David K. Hyde

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the US Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the Ethics of Emerging Military Technology Graduate Certificate. The contents of this paper reflect the author's views and are not necessarily endorsed by the US Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

Social media represents a technomoral dichotomy. As a tool, it has brought great benefits to many, yet it is also facilitating the spread of unethical behaviors that are degrading the moral foundations of the good life as envisioned in American democracy. Malicious actors are capitalizing on the moral listlessness of social media to attack the societal, political, and power structures that are core to American democracy and the flourishing of society. Foreign and domestic actors are leveraging emotivism to destroy public trust and rational cognitive processes through disinformation campaigns. Politicians and social media CEOs are using social media to alter the U.S. political landscape in unethical ways for their benefit, thus upsetting the delicate balance of power in American democracy. Left unchecked, future trends in emerging social media technologies will provide malevolent actors greater means for engaging in immoral behaviors to weaken the foundational structures of American democracy. Solutions to these challenging issues will require a technical approach coupled with a moral approach based upon the principles of virtue ethics. Applying ethical principles on the societal level to the rapidly evolving and tumultuous environment of social media will help ensure that American democracy flourishes into the good life—a life worth wanting.

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Most importantly, I am eternally indebted to my wife, Annabelle Hyde, who served as my greatest fan, harshest critic, ruthless in-house editor, and immovable and constant pillar of support. She saw what the project could become well before I did and had the patience and long-suffering to help me achieve it. Her efforts, along with those of the other aforementioned moral titans, kindles my faith that calls to ethical action can be a driving force for the betterment of society.

#Pandora'sBoxOpened

A person is defined solely by the extent of his influence over other people, by the sphere of his interrelationships; and morality is an utterly meaningless term unless defined as the good one does to others, the fulfilling of one's function in the sociopolitical whole.

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*, 56

The Netflix drama-documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, opens in dramatic fashion with multiple cuts scenes of current and former social media insiders passionately explaining how social media has morphed beyond the original intent of its creators into something problematic for society. Yet, when asked by an offscreen interlocutor to pinpoint the problem, each struggles to come up with a succinct answer.¹ Their difficulty in coming up with definitive responses captures the dichotomous role that social media plays in society today. On the one hand, social media has enabled interconnectedness and means of expression that have benefited countless individuals in unfathomable ways. On the other, as the Pew Research Center reports, the majority of Americans currently believe that social media is having a detrimental effect on U.S. society overall, even though they are unable to define one specific cause.² In this sense, social media is akin to a modern-day Pandora's Box that was opened with the best of intentions and instead released a host of evils into the world.³ For all its promise and benefits to society, social

¹ *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Olowski, (2020, Netflix), video on demand.

² Brooke Auxier, "64% of Americans say social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the U.S. today," Pew Research Center, October 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today/>.

³ *Dilemma*.

media is facilitating the spread of unethical behavior into the moral foundations of American society.

Social media is enabling malicious actors to attack the structures of societal trust, politics, and power that are fundamental to American democracy. First, foreign and domestic actors are destroying public trust and rational thinking through disinformation campaigns. Second, politicians and social media companies are altering the U.S. political landscape for their benefit. Third, social media CEOs and users are upsetting the delicate balance of power in American democracy. Future trends in emerging technologies will further enable malicious actors to attack these structures. Solutions to these challenging issues will require a technical approach coupled with a moral approach based in virtue ethics. The U.S. government should demonstrate moral leadership and take legislative action related to social media to preserve its moral obligation of ensuring the security and individual rights of American citizens. Social media companies should fully operationalize ethics by introducing legitimate, transparent, and fair policies and practices into their operations and AI-tools. Social media users need to take responsibility for their moral agency and demand ethical behaviors from government and social media companies. Together, the U.S. government, social media companies, and American citizens can overcome these the threats to ensure the flourishing of society and a robust American democracy.

Social Media, Technomoral Virtues, and the Good Life

To understand the threat social media poses to American democracy, it is helpful to first examine the ways in which the social mediasphere—the combination of technologies,

applications, social networks, user-generated content, moral and social norms, and cognitive effects that make up the human experience on social media—is impacting societal ethics and morals. As Shannon Vallor explains, this “technomoral” perspective is crucial because “technologies invite or *afford* specific patterns of thought, behavior, and valuing.” They are changing the human experience by opening some doors and closing others.⁴ Prior to the onset of social media, for instance, Nicholas Negroponte captured the promise of social media when he envisioned a world in which online activity would free us “from the limitation of geographic proximity,” creating an interconnected future in which technologies such as social media would be a primary driver for the harmonization of society.⁵ In reality, the social mediasphere has matched author Mary Doria Russell’s imagined future of “a culture gone mad with documentation, publicity, broadcast, narrowcast and pointcast, where every act of public and private life seem[s] to be done for an audience.”⁶ Social media has proven fertile ground for the expansion of what ethicist Jean Jacques Rousseau termed *amour propre*, or love of self.⁷ In the context of social media, *amour propre* is a wholly negative morality that promotes self-aggrandizement, the so-called humble brag, animosity, bullying, and a host of other immoral behavior that has become increasingly common on social media.

These types of immoral acts have become endemic on social media because the social mediasphere has burgeoned beyond expectations. American society has turned into what Neil Postman dubbed a Technopoly—a “totalitarian technocracy” where information is power and

⁴ Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

⁵ Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 230.

⁶ Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow* (New York: Random House, 2008), 223, 487, Kindle.

⁷ Christopher Bertram notes that *amour propre* is often translated as pride or vanity in English literature. See Christopher Bertram, “Jean Jacques Rousseau,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto: Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/rousseau/>.

technology is redefining core societal beliefs.⁸ Society looks to technologies, such as social media, as the ultimate authority on what is considered right and wrong. However, the inability of society to keep pace with the rapid advancements in emerging technologies means that the social mediasphere is evolving without the necessary “strong social institutions” and “moral underpinnings”⁹ to ensure the safety and liberty of all users. Social media, then, has become a no-holds-barred contest where society’s understanding of what constitutes appropriate online behavior goes to the victor with the most followers, friends, or some other artificial indicator of moral authority. This clouds the ability of American citizens to pursue the good life, or flourishing of society.

The good life, according to Socrates, is a broader reference to the kind of life that we would want for ourselves and others.¹⁰ The good life is morally synonymous with the flourishing of society, which is encapsulated in American democracy by the general framework of every citizen’s right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹¹ That is, American society is built around the ethical principles that each citizen possesses individual rights and the security to exercise them. The unchecked evolution and unethical use of social media technologies challenges the traditional notion of the good life and how it can be obtained by eroding the three structural pillars of American democracy—societal, political, and power. As depicted in Figure 1, these pillars are built upon a solid technomoral foundation, the creation of which “*demand[s] the successful cultivation of moral virtue*” through ethics.¹²

⁸ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 48, 71-2.

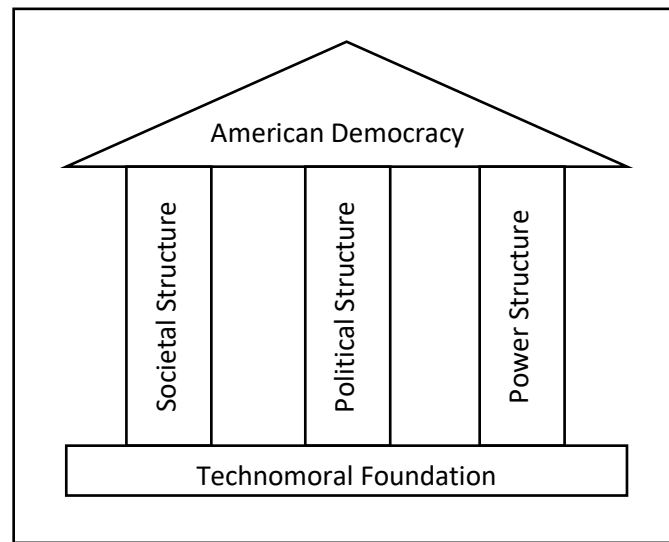
⁹ Postman, *Technopoly*, 60, 83.

¹⁰ Vallor, *Technology*, 2.

¹¹ “The Declaration of Independence,” National Archives, last modified March 20, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>.

¹² Vallor, *Technology*, 20.

Figure 1. Supporting Structures of American Democracy



Among the traditional schools of ethical thought, which include rules-based deontology and consequentialism, character-based virtue ethics is best suited for achieving the good life in the age of social media. Instead of pursuing a utilitarian or Kantian focus on determining what action is the most ethical, virtue ethics as espoused by Aristotle is concerned with determining the type of person an individual should be, which in turn, leads to actions that promote the flourishing of society.¹³ The ambiguous social norms and sheer vastness of the social mediasphere presents moral conundrums that are stumbling blocks to the full practice of rules-based deontology or consequentialism, particularly as the pace of technological advancement in the social media space continues to outstrip society's ability to create accepted norms for its use. Virtue ethics promotes the good life through the development of individual virtues that will preserve the technomoral foundation of American democracy. In so doing, virtue ethics provides

¹³ Lawrence Hinman, *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2013), 249.

a framework for understanding how social media is contributing to the erosion of the societal structures that support American democracy and the good life.

Public Trust and Disinformation 2.0

Social media is tearing apart the societal pillar of public trust in American democracy by allowing malicious actors to create and disseminate disinformation. Disinformation is intentionally incorrect or misleading information that is used for the explicit purpose of deceiving, confusing, or otherwise influencing a target's thoughts and behaviors.¹⁴ It is a type of black propaganda, where the original source of the information is disguised or otherwise obfuscated,¹⁵ making it challenging to detect, identify, and deter its spread. The cheapness, ease, and speed with which disinformation propagates across social media has made it the weapon of choice for foreign governments to sow discord, distrust, and division among American citizens and with the U.S. government by exploiting weaknesses and cracks in the democratic system, trying to widen the fissures.¹⁶ As information security professor Thomas Rid explains, disinformation "corrodes the foundations of liberal democracy, our ability to assess facts on their merits and to self-correct accordingly"¹⁷ by inciting hyper-emotionalism.

¹⁴ Disinformation is often erroneously labeled in media, academic, and government sources as misinformation, which is the unintentional spread of false information. While both have the capacity to deceive, the author will focus on disinformation as attempts by malicious actors to intentionally influence American social media users.

¹⁵ As part of the propaganda taxonomy, Marco Bastos and Johan Farkas also include white propaganda, where the information source is obvious and knowable, and grey propaganda, where the source is not readily identifiable. See Marco Bastos and Johan Farkas, "'Donald Trump Is My President!': The Internet Research Agency Propaganda Machine," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (July 2019): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119865466>.

¹⁶ Nina Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 198.

¹⁷ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: the Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 7-8.

Emotivism and Disinformation

Emotivism is dangerous for American democracy and seeking the good life because it substitutes emotion for rational thought. Emotivism creates an atmosphere in which “moral judgements...cannot be used for reasoned persuasion,” and are instead viewed as personal preferences and an attempt to persuade others to our point of view.¹⁸ This ego-centric component of *amour propre* discourages ethical behavior and lends itself towards emotional hijacking. T.S. Eliot, writing long before the advent of social media, explained that people “tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts” when confronted with a lack of knowledge, either real or perceived.¹⁹ The social mediasphere generates morally complex environments that are devoid of any moral guidelines. Disinformation is designed to overload a target audience’s cognitive and reasoning capabilities. Accordingly, social media provides a medium ripe for emotional hijacking, which leads affected individuals to possess “less perspective (and) poorer judgement, while making more errors.”²⁰ Those who become emotionally compromised by disinformation are less able to clearly discern and practice the virtues necessary for the good life.

Disinformation reliably invokes emotivism through the manipulative use of narratives and by leveraging a system of amplification that relies upon social media. Authors P. W. Singer and Emerson Brooking explain that narratives “are the building blocks that explain both how humans see the world and how they exist in large groups.”²¹ We use narratives to make sense of our lives, society, and events in the world around us. Disinformation uses narratives interwoven

¹⁸ Ted Clayton, “MacIntyre: Political Philosophy,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/p-macint/#H5>.

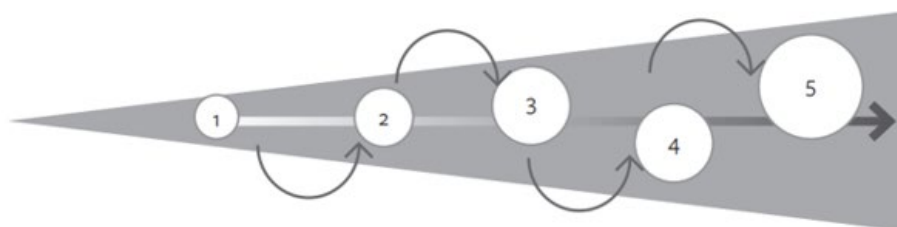
¹⁹ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2015), 9.

²⁰ Nicole Eull, “Emotional Intelligence: Five Ways to Have Better Interactions and Improve Your Work Life,” *Family Practice Management* 27, no. 5 (September 2020): 10, ProQuest.

²¹ P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *Likewar: the Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 154.

with emotion, authenticity, community, and inundation to make otherwise implausible information compelling and believable.²² The emotional veracity of malicious information is further confirmed through the disinformation amplification workflow. Based on Oz Sultan's original explanation of the Russian online propaganda workflow,²³ Figure 2 details how disinformation is amplified through social media. Once a malicious idea is initially injected (1), it then receives validation through propagation by traditional or social media sources (2) and is further amplified by presumably authoritative sources, such as foreign or domestic government institutions (3). At this point the idea continues to generate significant social media buzz (4) until it has reached the point of self-amplification through continued sharing, commentary, and offshoot ideas (5). By the time an item of disinformation has reached the fifth stage, it is starting to capitalize on the illusory truth effect, where repeated exposure and amplification by presumably verified sources leads people to believe that the idea is true.²⁴

Figure 2. Disinformation Amplification Workflow²⁵



²² Singer and Brooking, *Likewar*, 154.

²³ Oz Sultan, "Tackling Disinformation, Online Terrorism, and Cyber Risks into the 2020s," *The Cyber Defense Review* 4, no. 1 (2019): 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26623066>.

²⁴ Matt Chessen, "Understanding the Psychology Behind Computational Propaganda," in *Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?: Bots, Echo Chambers, and Disinformation*, ed. Shawn Powers and Markos Kounalakis (Washington, DC: U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, May 1, 2017), 19.

²⁵ Sultan, "Tackling Disinformation," 45.

Disinformation 1.0 – Foreign Actors

Foreign actors have been using social media and the amplification workflow to disseminate disinformation and prompt emotivism to great effect. In one instance, a fake Russian account posing as a patriotic Christian American entity ran a preposterously inexpensive and outlandish advertisement on Facebook for one day in 2016 comparing the U.S. presidential race between candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump to an arm-wrestling match between Satan and Jesus. In terms of immediate reach, it was a dismal failure, garnering only a miniscule number of impressions, clicks, and shares. The ad likely would have remained relatively unnoticed had not *The New York Times* mentioned it in a front-page story about Russian election interference and reproduced it in an online article. (Figure 3) Thus, as Rid points out, “mainstream press coverage *generated* the actual effect of a disinformation operation,”²⁶ which was then amplified as the story and the ad content was further disseminated over social media. While it is unclear if the ad actually swayed any voters, the inevitable course of the disinformation amplification workflow brought a blatantly false and ludicrous notion out of obscurity, affording it unearned legitimacy as an ideological truth for susceptible targets.

Figure 3. Russian-produced political ad propagated by mainstream media.²⁷

²⁶ Rid, *Active Measures*, 398, 407-8. The ad was described in text in the November 1, 2017 issue of *The New York Times*, and reproduced online. See Cecilia Kang, Nicholas Fandos, and Mike Isaac, “Congress Scolds Tech Companies Over Russia,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2017, A1-A12, ProQuest; Cecilia Kang, Nicholas Fandos, and Mike Isaac, “Russia-Financed Ad Linked Clinton and Satan,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/us/politics/facebook-google-twitter-russian-interference-hearings.html>.

²⁷ Kang, Fandos, Isaac, “Russia-Financed Ad.”

Army of Jesus
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Today Americans are able to elect a president with godly moral principles. Hillary is a Satan, and her crimes and lies had proved just how evil she is. And even though Donald Trump isn't a saint by any means, he's at least an honest man and he cares deeply for this country. My vote goes for him!



97 Reactions · 15 Comments · 29 Shares

Like Comment Share

Foreign adversaries are also using the power of social media in the disinformation amplification workflow to exploit emotivism in existing legitimate social movements for their own ends. As Laura Rosenberger explains in *Journal of Democracy*, “Russian information operations hijacked the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, creating fake BLM groups on Facebook and other social-media platforms and using legitimate concerns about police brutality and criminal justice as a way to suppress the black vote.”²⁸ Using fake accounts, often impersonating black Americans,²⁹ Russian actors synthesized a divisive narrative that promoted civil discord and disunity, creating a cognitive gap between the emotional and logical aspects of the BLM movement. By using social media to emotionally hijack both sides of the BLM movement, Russia has undermined the possibility for reasoned, rational debate on this socially

²⁸ Laura Rosenberger, “Disinformation Disorientation,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (Jan 2020): 205, ProQuest.

²⁹ Indira Neill Hoch, “Russian Internet Research Agency Disinformation Activities on Tumblr: Identity, Privacy, and Ambivalence,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 4 (October 2020): 3, ProQuest.

important issue. Social movements, such as BLM, are complex, emotionally charged topics that are important in defining the social fabric and morals of American society. Yet, instead of encouraging passionate and reasoned debate drawing upon the ethics of liberty and justice, social media has turned the issue into a powder keg of emotivism with disinformation as the spark.

Disinformation heightens emotivism by building false ideas upon kernels of truth. As the United States worked to get American-produced COVID-19 vaccines to market, for instance, foreign governments stepped up attempts to sow doubt and distrust in the vaccine and the medical community, drawing upon the fact that people of color and minority groups have at times been grossly mistreated in the U.S. medical community.³⁰ Russian entities have used their popular and widely read Spanish-language social media presence to sow doubt about American-produced vaccines and undermine the United States' participation in "the collective global effort to end the global pandemic."³¹ Disinformation campaigns on Chinese-language social media sites have similarly targeted Chinese Americans,³² and social media has been used to encourage distrust among black Americans by repeatedly invoking associations between the vaccine and the now-condemned and ethically abhorrent Tuskegee syphilis experiment that ran from the 1930s to the early 1970s.³³ By sowing suspicion toward the medical community and doubts in vaccine

³⁰ Shira Ovide, "On Tech: How to Reach the Unvaccinated," *New York Times*, March 10, 2021, https://messaging-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?campaign_id=158&emc=edit_ot_20210310&instance_id=27913&nl=on-tech-with-shira-ovide&productCode=OT®i_id=155798698&segment_id=53142&te=1&uri=nyt%3A%2F%2Fnewsletter%2Fcc923904-1638-5c9e-a6fd-67e8f99bdfc1&user_id=dcc167a343c811025734db56e165d30a.

³¹ Ovide, "Unvaccinated,"; Sheera Frenkel, Maria Abi-Habib, and Julian E. Barnes, "Russian Campaign Promotes Homegrown Vaccine and Undercuts Rivals," *New York Times*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/technology/russia-covid-vaccine-disinformation.html>.

³² The *New York Times* article does not differentiate between mis- and disinformation. Based upon the definition established earlier, the author of this paper has identified Russian efforts to inject false or misleading information about the COVID vaccine as disinformation. See Sheera Frenkel, "Black and Hispanic Communities Grapple with Vaccine Misinformation," *New York Times*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/technology/vaccine-misinformation.html>.

³³ Frenkel, "Vaccine Misinformation."

trustworthiness, foreign actors have created a national security risk to the health and safety of the American public.

Disinformation 2.0 - Domestic Actors

In addition to foreign entities, disinformation expert Nina Jankowicz warns in her book, *How to Lose the Information War*, that “homegrown actors” are increasingly leveraging “domestic disinformation to amplify existing conflict and discord.”³⁴ Domestic actors are recognizing the effectiveness of the amplification workflow to trigger emotivism for their purposes. But whereas foreign actors typically rely upon a verified, authoritative source to amplify the original item of disinformation, domestic parties can more easily condense workflow stages by acting as the presumed authoritative source. This shortened validation and amplification cycle jumpstarts emotivism by eliminating opportunities for authoritative sources to debunk or counter the intentionally false information.

The political arena has been a hotbed of domestic disinformation. Independent candidate Shiva Ayyadurai, for example, employed a “homegrown, red, white, and blue disinformation campaign” in the 2018 Massachusetts Senate race against Democratic incumbent Elizabeth Warren.³⁵ Similarly, supporters of Democratic candidate Doug Jones resorted to disinformation campaigns on social media in an attempt to influence the 2017 Alabama Senate race over the Republican incumbent, Roy Moore. In 2020, Republican agitators disseminated a recontextualized video of a verbal gaffe by then Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden to make it appear that he was admitting to having an enormous voter fraud organization.³⁶ The

³⁴ Jankowicz, *Information War*, 207.

³⁵ Jankowicz, *Information War*, 206.

³⁶ Recontextualization refers to the practice of taking original content from a media source and reframing it for other than its intended purpose. See Emily Dreyfuss, “Recontextualized Media: Biden ‘Voter Fraud Organization’,”

disinformation in each of these instances came from ostensibly reliable sources, which provided for greater validation as traditional news outlets, government officials, celebrity personalities, and social media sources further propagated the false information.³⁷

These examples of domestic disinformation are part of a worrying trend. Rand Waltzman, senior information scientist at the RAND Corporation, suggests that the threat from domestic disinformation campaigns may now even exceed that of foreign campaigns.³⁸ Domestic disinformation campaigns, perhaps even more than those of foreign actors, undermine public trust and the ethical foundation of American democracy, or the good life. External disinformation campaigns seek to abuse the cognitive biases, heuristics, and emotions of American citizens from without while domestic actors do so from within. In both cases, social media is providing the means for eroding the foundations of the good life as envisioned in American democracy.

New (But Not Improved) Politics

In addition to the problem of disinformation, social media represents a national security threat by providing a means for the erosion of the political structures necessary for American

Media Manipulation Casebook, December 10, 2020, <https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/recontextualized-media-biden-voter-fraud-organization>.

³⁷ Nina Jankowicz, "Shiva Ayyadurai's Senate Campaign Was Being Promoted By Fake Facebook Accounts," *BuzzFeedNews*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ninajankowicz/elizabeth-warren-senate-campaign-shiva-ayyadurai-facebook>; Craig Timberg, "How 'Project Birmingham' Spread Misinformation in the 2017 Alabama State Election," interview by Audie Cornish, *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 9, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/09/683731977/how-project-birmingham-spread-misinformation-in-the-2017-alabama-senate-election>; Emily Dreyfuss, "Recontextualized Media."

³⁸ Rand Waltzman, "Modern Day Social Media Warfare," interview by Robert Spalding, *Generally Speaking*, Valuetainment, October 17, 2020, video, 12:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOfL4gn1BHI>.

democracy. Political structures in this context are those that uphold the ethical claims that American citizens have on the government to ensure both national security and individual rights. Seen through this liberal communitarian ethical lens, the U.S. government is assumed to be committed to upholding both claims.³⁹ Consequently, friction will inevitably occur between security and liberty as the balance shifts from one claim to the other depending on the sociopolitical climate. As a liberal democratic government, the United States seeks to minimize this friction through solutions that satisfy both claims and promote the good life or common flourishing for its citizens by ensuring security and individual rights. Social media has thrown this perpetual quest for equilibrium off kilter by injecting new factors that skew the political structures needed to protect these rights.

The ongoing and highly publicized debates over the rights to the freedom of speech and expression highlight how social media is altering the political landscape. In some senses, the clash between social media and the freedom of speech has been a long time coming. Social media, as a democratizing force, provides its users with a megaphone for voicing their ideas. While this has led to an immense amount of good, it has also served as a petri dish for the expression and propagation of racist, sexist, violent, and other unsavory content. Without any established description of normative behavior or enforcement mechanisms in social media, it was only a matter of time before the government's obligation to protect the individual right of free speech collided with its obligation to provide security. This is precisely what happened in 2014 when the U.S. Supreme Court first heard a case, *Elonis v. U.S.*, that pitted the defendant's claim that threatening comments he posted on Facebook amounted to free speech against the

³⁹ Amitai Etzioni, "Apple: Good Business, Poor Citizen?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 151, no. 1 (August 2018): 3, ProQuest.

governments obligation to protect those he threatened.⁴⁰ *Elonis v. U.S.* was significant for two profound reasons. First, it brought national-level attention to the challenge the government faces in balancing its ethical obligations when social media is involved. Second, it exposed an underlying, if nascent, implication that the social mediasphere lacked a moral authority or guiding structure for determining what was socially and politically acceptable online behavior.

Sources of Ethical Intent

The government theoretically serves this higher moral function through the ethical process and intention determined in the legal system. Drawing upon the works by ethicist Paul Ricoeur, Boston College's Richard Nielson explains that the idea of ethical process is built on the ethics of justice and equality. Put another way, ethical process is based on ethical intention and a mutual recognition that every citizen has the same right and claim to liberty. The government supplies ethical intention through law,⁴¹ which makes it a suitable institution for moral arbitration in cases where the law has clearly been violated. The ethical intent of the First Amendment, for example, is clear: "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."⁴² But, as *Elonis v. U.S.* demonstrated, social media has created a complicated moral environment where the government is stuck between the proverbial rock and

⁴⁰ The defendant was originally arrested on December 8, 2010 for posting threatening comments to his ex-wife, an FBI agent, the local police, co-workers, and a kindergarten class. See "*Elonis v. U.S.*," United States Courts, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/elonis-v-us>; "Facts and Case Summary - *Elonis v. U.S.*," United States Courts, December 2, 2020, <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/facts-and-case-summary-elonis-v-us>.

⁴¹ Richard Nielsen, "Ethical and Legal First Amendment Implications of *FBI v. Apple*: A Commentary on Etzioni's 'Apple: Good Business, Poor Citizen?'," *Journal of Business Ethics* 151, no. 1 (August 2018): 24, ProQuest.

⁴² "Constitution of the United States: First Amendment," Constitution Annotated, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>.

hard place: it cannot prosecute or prohibit threatening speech, with the exception of specific situations, without violating its ethical obligation to ensure liberty and individual rights.

Social media companies, for their part, have attempted to resolve this situation by inserting themselves as an intermediary between the government and the citizenry for determining what speech is permitted and what it not. They ostensibly do this through their rules of use and engagement. For instance, Facebook's "Community Standards" and Twitter's "The Twitter Rules" clearly denounce racial, sexist, violent, threatening, and other degrading and dehumanizing speech or content.⁴³ However, unlike the government, which has an ethical obligation to protect freedom of speech, the social media companies have demonstrated a lack of ethical intent to enforce their policies equitably. In a review of Facebook and Twitter content related to the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign, for example, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that female Congressional candidates received significantly more content that was deemed abusive than their male counterparts. Among the female candidates, those with ethnic minority backgrounds faced even higher levels of abusive comments and tweets.⁴⁴ This activity is in direct violation of social media firms' rules of the road yet was permitted to occur and propagate.

To be sure, social media firms face a daunting task in enforcing their policies and rules of use. There are inevitably going to be those among the millions of users who have a warped version of what constitutes the good life and who are taking advantage of social media to

⁴³ "Objectionable Content," Community Standards, Facebook, accessed April 2, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/objectionable_content; "The Twitter Rules: Safety, Privacy, Authenticity, and More," Twitter, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>.

⁴⁴ Cécile Guerin, Eisha Maharasingam-Shah, *Public Figures Public Rage: Candidate Abuse on Social Media* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), 3, 15-20, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/public-figures-public-rage-candidate-abuse-on-social-media/>.

perpetuate hateful speech. To combat the spread of harmful ideologies, social media companies have proclaimed their intentions to leverage AI tools as “the scalable way” to detect, deter, and delete the majority of this harmful content.⁴⁵ In recognition of AI’s limits, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg also boasted in his testimony before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2018 about Facebook’s ambitious plans to hire tens of thousands employees to perform security and content reviews of user-generated content.⁴⁶ While these measures may provide for good sound bites, a closer examination of ethical intention reveals that they both fall short of promoting human flourishing. AI tools are not morally agnostic; they are imbued with the values of designers and programmers. Without an understanding of the ethical controls used in creating and deploying the AI tools, they run the risk of creating more ethical problems than they solve. Similarly, the prized qualification for an aspiring content reviewer appears to be social media experience, not any ethical or philosophical education or training.⁴⁷ Thus, with AI tools and an army of content reviewers and no transparent moral guidelines, Facebook is pursuing what author Neal Stephenson refers to as “a cheap technical fix” to a complex problem.⁴⁸

This concern of moral ambiguity is heightened by the way that social media firms have used the legal tools at their disposal. In perhaps an unusual display of foresight, the U.S.

⁴⁵ Facebook, *Social Media Privacy, and the Use and Abuse of Data: Testimony before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and the Committee on the Judiciary*, 115th Cong. 683 (April 10, 2018), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CHRG-115shrg37801/CHRG-115shrg37801/context>.

⁴⁶ S. H., 115-683, *Facebook*.

⁴⁷ Facebook relies largely upon contract employees to perform content reviews. Many of the contract companies do not advertise their relationship with Facebook out of security concerns and therefore do not specifically recruit Facebook content moderators. See Casey Newton, “The Secret Lives of Facebook Moderators in America,” *The Verge*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/25/18229714/cognizant-facebook-content-moderator-interviews-trauma-working-conditions-arizona>. For generic job requirements for social media content moderators, see “Social-Media-Content-Moderator”, ZipRecruiter, accessed May 23, 2021. <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Career/Social-Media-Content-Moderator/What-Is-How-to-Become>.

⁴⁸ Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), 6.

government recognized the potential ethical morass that the internet could become when it passed the Communications Decency Act (CDA) of 1996, which afforded internet platforms certain protections against liability for user-generated content under Section 230. At the time, the U.S. government was looking to the CDA as a tool to limit the spread of child pornography and other related indecent material. Section 230 was enacted to provide immunity for service providers in certain contexts from liability for offending content that was generated and disseminated by individual users.⁴⁹ The government's ethical intention behind providing service providers with this powerful protection carried an implicit moral expectation that it would be used for the benefit of human flourishing. However, as Richard Nielsen notes in *Journal of Business Ethics*, this obligation is seldom adhered to by the service providers or enforced by the government.⁵⁰ Indeed, the government has undermined the ethical intention of Section 230 by demonstrating a reluctance to enforce the full scope of legal provisions that might hold social media companies accountable for permitting certain behaviors.⁵¹ As a result, social media companies have been able to systematically abuse Section 230 protections for morally ambiguous ends that suit the needs of the company and not the good of society.

A New Social Politicking

Social media is also altering the way that America engages in democratic political processes. After initially being slow to grasp the potential of how modern social media usage

⁴⁹ Ellen P. Goodman, Ryan Whittington, *Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act and the Future of Online Speech*, Report no. 20 (Washington, D.C.: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019), 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21228>.

⁵⁰ Nielsen, "Good Business, Poor Citizen?," 26.

⁵¹ Valerie Brannon, *Liability for Content Hosts: An Overview of the Communication Decency Act's Section 230*, LS Report No. LSB10306 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 6, 2019), 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/LSB10306.pdf>.

could revolutionize politicking and political activism, U.S. government officials have taken to the social media scene with enthusiasm. The 116th Congress was the most digitally active legislative session in history, with Members of Congress producing 680,000 tweets and 1.57 million Facebook posts.⁵² While posts and tweets are not an indication of effective governing, it appears that Congressional Members are taking advantage of what digital expert Mindy Finn termed the “repersonalizing” of political campaigning,⁵³ as interactions between politicians and the public are no longer constrained by time, distance, and space. In theory, this new interconnectedness appears to satisfy Ricoeur’s notion of ethical democratic power by affording more American citizens the opportunity to lend their voice to influence the creation and passing of legislation.⁵⁴ In reality, however, the repersonalization of politicking has led to increased polarization and the stifling of democratic debate as politicians have increasingly used social media for unethical purposes through such methods as political astroturfing, padding subscribership numbers to imply widespread popularity and consensus, and promoting misleading information for political gain.⁵⁵

From the vantage point of ethics, the ongoing hyperpolarization is leading to a failure of American politics. Philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau noted that politics fail when “the political community is differentiated into factions...and where one faction can impose its collective will

⁵² Aaron Smith and Sono Shah, “Though Not Especially Productive in Passing Bills, the 116th Congress Set New Marks for Social Media Use,” *Pew Research Center*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/25/though-not-especially-productive-in-passing-bills-the-116th-congress-set-new-marks-for-social-media-use/>.

⁵³ “How Social Networking Can Reinvigorate American Democracy and Civic Participation,” June 28, 2011, The Brookings Institution, video, 1:28:56, <https://www.brookings.edu/events/how-social-networking-can-reinvigorate-american-democracy-and-civic-participation/>.

⁵⁴ Nielsen, “Good Business, Poor Citizen?,” 26.

⁵⁵ Political astroturfing refers to the practice of creating the perception of a grassroots movement or conversation online, typically using social media bots. See Onur Varol, et al., “Early Detection of Promoted Campaigns on Social Media,” *EPJ Data Science* 6, no. 1 (July 2017): 1-2, <http://dx.doi.org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-017-0111-y>.

on the state as a whole.”⁵⁶ The American democratic political system maintains distinct separations and balances of power that were designed by law into the system, with the ethical intention of no branch of the government or political party having complete control over the affairs of the country. By and large, these checks and balances, coupled with a free press and engaged citizenry, have acted as foils to the dominance of one party over the other. Social media, however, is changing the political status quo. Social media is facilitating the failure envisioned by Rousseau by creating an environment in which politicians are encouraged to spread extreme political views and by actively building a more partisan and factional social mediasphere.

The rise in social media usage by U.S. government officials has allowed for the greater spread of more radical political ideologies. Analysis by the Pew Research Center revealed that the number of more radical members of Congress on both sides of the political aisle have vastly greater numbers of followers than their more moderate colleagues.⁵⁷ While the number of followers is not an accurate measure of true reach or even popularity, it is an indication of how social media has become the battlefield of choice for engaging in political combat. The Pew Research Center’s analysis indicated that more radical members of Congress were more likely to post or “share content that expressed indignation or disagreement on political matters, and that such posts drew more engagement online.”⁵⁸ Thus, the more ethically pliable politicians have an incentive to either cement their position as party radicals or to rebrand themselves away from the middle in order to increase followership and the size of their megaphone. The spread of extreme political ideas by politicians on social media is contributing to the ongoing inversion of the

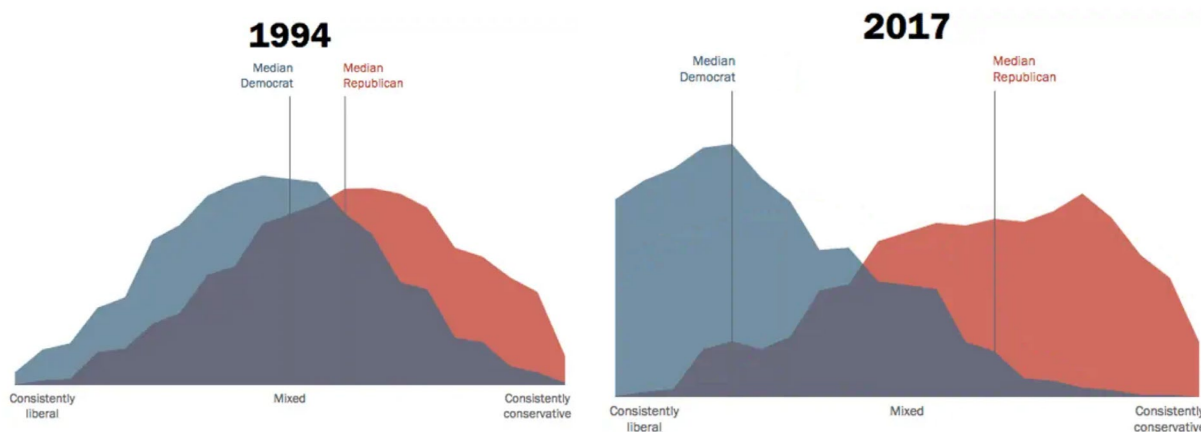
⁵⁶ Bertram, "Rousseau."

⁵⁷ Adam Hughes and Onyi Lam, "Congress' Most Liberal, Conservative Members Have More Facebook Followers," *Pew Research Center*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/21/highly-ideological-members-of-congress-have-more-facebook-followers-than-moderates-do/>.

⁵⁸ Hughes and Lam, "Congress'."

typical political spectrum distribution. Figure 4 displays the generalized distribution of liberal and conservative ideologies in 1994, which represents the expected bell curve distribution with the majority of voters coalesced in the middle with only a few radical outliers. By 2017, the polarization and factionalizing that began in the early 2010s has developed into a marked trough, with more Americans moving to the extreme ends of the spectrum.⁵⁹ The resulting shift displaces the ideological equilibrium needed for the government to shield individual freedoms from the excesses of extreme far-right and far-left agitators.

Figure 4. A widening political divide.⁶⁰



The impact that repersonalization is having on the polarization and factionalizing of American politics is further complicated by the fact that politicians are blurring ethical lines by increasingly using their personal social media accounts to conduct official business. During his tenure as president, Donald Trump made extensive use of his personal Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) to make policy statements, sack senior administration officials, and

⁵⁹ Philip Bump, "The Political Divide in the United States, Animated," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/10/23/the-political-divide-in-the-united-states-animated/>.

⁶⁰ Bump, "Political Divide."

conduct other presidential business in a way that undermined long-standing official channels. While these actions were in line with his Trumpian brand of bucking the trend, they were weaved among Trump's typically bombastic personal expressions, which served to cloud society's collective conscious of what constituted official government policy. Similarly, Congressmembers are increasingly using their personal social media accounts to not only communicate to their constituencies, but to carry on partisan bickering and trading insults from afar, such as in the recurring Twitter war between Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC) and Republican Senator Ted Cruz (@tedcruz).⁶¹ In short, social media is not being used as a tool of reasoned democratic debate, but as a repersonalized weapon for politicians to attack one another with disparaging comments and maintain ongoing feuds in broad view of the entire American public. These are fights with no winners, as the unethical use of social media by politicians undermines public trust in the political system and confidence that the government is capable of carrying out its obligations to provide security and individual rights.

Slanted Platforms

The increasing unethical behavior among politicians is being buttressed by the political preferences of the social media platforms themselves. Social media has often been promoted as a public forum or town square where ideas can be freely exchanged. The social media companies have supported this democratic narrative; Twitter, for example, exists "to give everyone the

⁶¹ Biba Adams, "AOC, Ted Cruz Clash on Twitter After Call for His Resignation from Senate," *Yahoo!News*, January 8, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/aoc-ted-cruz-clash-twitter-134934465.html>; Marisa Sarnoff, "AOC and Ted Cruz Reignite Twitter War in Heated Debate Over Border: 'You Have No Policy, Just Puff'," *MSN*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/aoc-and-ted-cruz-reignite-twitter-war-in-heated-debate-over-border-you-have-no-policy-just-puff/ar-BB1fdD7L>.

power to create and share information instantly without barriers”⁶² while Facebook’s goal is to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.”⁶³ Despite these altruistic statements, the harsh reality is that social media firms are contributing to the political polarization and factionalizing of America. A study by the Pew Research Center shows that Democratic lawmakers, who became more active on social media in the first half of 2020, received a disproportionately larger share of audience engagement than their Republican counterparts, suggesting an increasing trend towards politically liberal ideals.⁶⁴ It is tempting to write off this shift to the preferential political whims of usership. However, a look at political contributions reveals that this ideological shift echoes the political preferences of the companies’ owners. For example, Google’s parent company, Alphabet Inc., contributed over \$21 million to Democrats compared to just over \$1 million to Republicans in 2019-2020. Facebook and Twitter followed a similar trend during the same period, contributing over \$6.25 million to Democrats and less than \$537,000 to Republicans, and almost \$950,000 to Democrats and just over \$16,000 to Republicans, respectively. The raw numbers do not tell the whole story. Many internet firms lobbied heavily in support of net neutrality laws,⁶⁵ a position supported primarily by Democratic politicians. But the staggering disparity also highlights the fact that social media platforms are not nonpartisan or apolitical. They are imbued with the political, ideological, and moral preferences of their creators.

⁶² “What is Twitter’s Mission Statement?” FAQ, Twitter, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://investor.twitterinc.com/contact/faq/default.aspx>.

⁶³ “What is Facebook’s Mission Statement?” FAQs, Facebook, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://investor.fb.com/resources/default.aspx>.

⁶⁴ Patrick Van Kessel, et al, “1. The congressional social media landscape,” in *Congress Soars to New Heights on Social Media* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2020), 17. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/16/1-the-congressional-social-media-landscape/>.

⁶⁵ “Top Contributors, 2019-2020,” Center for Responsive Politics, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.opensecrets.oaburg/industries/indus.php?ind=B13>.

Translated into real-world application, this ingrained political bias exacerbates the challenges to the United States' political structures. American democracy requires a well-informed citizenry willing to engage in the exchange of ideas to thrive. Already a poor medium for reasoned debate, an increasingly partisan and factional social mediasphere threatens to squelch dissenting voices and to increase the preponderance of echo chambers of thought. Many right-wing personalities and supporters flocked to the social media app Parler in late 2020 seeking freedom of speech following what they considered to be the biased censorship of Twitter and Facebook.⁶⁶ The irony of this influx is that Parler itself turned into a silo of ideological expressionism. This problem will continue to grow as Trump has expressed his intention to create his own social media platform in response to his expulsion from Twitter and Facebook after the deadly insurrection at the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021.⁶⁷ Unfortunately this polarization removes the ability for American citizens to be actively involved in the type of robust debate that underpins the democratic process.

The Imbalance of Power

Social media is negatively changing the power structures that American democracy depends upon to thrive and survive. It is limiting the ability of people to acquire and apply knowledge in meaningful ways to the benefit of democracy. Alvin Toffler asserts “knowledge is the most democratic source of power.”⁶⁸ Power in American democracy resides in the capacity

⁶⁶ “Parler 'Free Speech' App Tops Charts in Wake of Trump Defeat,” *BBC News*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-54873800>.

⁶⁷ Ronn Blitzer, “Trump Returning to Social Media with 'His Own Platform' in 2-3 Months: Adviser,” *Fox News*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-social-media-platform-return-adviser>.

⁶⁸ “The Last Word: Knowledge,” *The Journal of Business Strategy* 23, no. 3 (May/June 2002), 48, ProQuest.

and capability of the populace to apply knowledge in the exercise of individual rights and liberties and in pursuit of the societal virtues that constitute the good life, such as truthfulness, fairness, equality, justice, and kindness. Vallor explains that, according to Aristotelian traditional thought, moral virtues proceed from states in a person's character and not simply from virtuous acts. This means that true moral virtue stems from consistently doing and wanting to do the right thing.⁶⁹ Therefore, people exercise knowledge unto power when they have the freedom and ability to engage in acts that promote the moral flourishing of society. The ethical intention of America's founding fathers was for power to reside in the people and exercised as "government of the people by the people for the people."⁷⁰ Social media is shifting the locus of democratic power from the people into the hands of a few.

Rise of the Information Oligarchy

Social media has upset the balance of power in the United States by enabling the rise of an information oligarchy, where social media CEOs have gained power over society through the unfettered acquisition and operationalization of knowledge. Shoshana Zuboff contends that social media and Big Tech CEOs, whom she refers to as Surveillance Capitalists, have created an asymmetry in power through the hoarding and monetization of immense amounts of knowledge—information from and about us—while simultaneously keeping their operations and knowledge acquisition systems opaque.⁷¹ A growing number of prominent voices have started speaking out to draw attention to this power imbalance. Former Google design ethicist and the

⁶⁹ Vallor, *Technology*, 18-19.

⁷⁰ "Gettysburg Address (1863)," Our Documents.Gov, accessed on April 3, 2021, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=36&page=transcript>.

⁷¹ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 10-11, 498.

co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology Tristan Harris, for example, raises the specter of this power imbalance by pointing out that “if you don’t pay for the product, then you are the product.”⁷² In other words, social media CEOs are acquiring wealth and power by selling the human experience of its users for monetary gain. While containing an element of truth, Zuboff argues this view is overly simplistic; by allowing the unbridled consumption of our information, we have become the engine driving the accumulation of power by the oligarchy.⁷³

In order to keep the power generation machine turning, the information oligarchs have created a system that subjugates its users. Social media platforms were created with the intention to be addictive. Sean Parker, who served as the first president of Facebook, explained that social media applications were designed to provide a dopamine hit to subconsciously incentivize users to devote as much of their “time and conscious attention as possible.” Former Facebook vice-president for user growth Chamath Palihapitiy further elaborated on the danger of this system of designed addiction, warning that “the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works.”⁷⁴ Parker and Palihapitiy’s description of the use-reward system are not overstated. As Daria Kuss and Mark Griffiths discuss in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, the scientific research community has begun equating symptoms of excessive social media usage with those typically associated with substance abuse: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, relapse, and conflict.⁷⁵ Social media addiction severely limits our ability to think and reason rationally and to make

⁷² *Dilemma*.

⁷³ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 10.

⁷⁴ Alex Hern, “‘Never Get High on Your Own Supply’ – Why Social Media Bosses Don’t Use Social Media,” *Guardian*, January 3, 2021. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/23/never-get-high-on-your-own-supply-why-social-media-bosses-dont-use-social-media>.

⁷⁵ Daria J. Kuss and Mark D. Griffiths, “Social Networking Sites and Addiction: Ten Lessons Learned,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 3 (March 2017): 6, ProQuest.

moral judgments. Moreover, the societal pathology that Palihapitiy forecasts is occurring as users become increasingly beholden to the information oligarchs.

The information oligarchy wields its power by determining what users are able to see and experience. With the knowledge power they wield, they have the ability to either promote the flourishing of society or infringe upon our individual rights. Author Peter Pomerantsev warns that the ability to control the dissemination of information and knowledge affords “the powerful new ways to crush and silence dissent.”⁷⁶ Through powerful AI-driven algorithms, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media companies have “the power to include, exclude, and rank...[content]... to ensure which public impressions become permanent and which remain fleeting.”⁷⁷ By controlling what we see, the information oligarchs are the architects of the social world that that we pretend to have created.⁷⁸ Society is becoming increasingly more beholden to the information oligarchs, who maintain knowledge power but who have not shown any moral constraint in its use.

In order to maintain the power that comes from their knowledge dominance, the information oligarchs need a source of social legitimacy. They have attempted to acquire this legitimacy by assuming the roles of moral authorities, particularly through enacting and enforcing platform policies that stipulate appropriate behavior and through highly publicized displays of pretended moral righteousness. For example, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg attempted to paint himself as an ethical leader by establishing an independent Oversight Board comprised of experts from around the world with expertise in a variety of social and human rights issues. When invoked, the Oversight Board will provide a binding post mortem

⁷⁶ Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019), xi.

⁷⁷ Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 60-61.

⁷⁸ Pasquale, *Black Box*, 60-61.

determination on the ethicality of the company's decision to censor or otherwise remove content or user accounts.⁷⁹ Similarly, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey has appealed to the wisdom of the masses by turning to Wikipedia as a component of its beleaguered process for determining if a user or entity meets the notability and authenticity requirements to receive a coveted blue verified badge.⁸⁰ Taken *prima facie*, these actions appear to carry a modicum of morality, as Kantian duty ethics state that the ethicality of an act is determined by the reason for which it was taken. Thus, complying with company policies in this sense appears to be moral out of a sense of duty. But, as Vallor argues, compliance with company policies does not ensure morally virtuous thoughts or behaviors, "such as honesty, courage, moderation, and patience that promote their possessor's reliable performance of right or excellent actions."⁸¹

Moral authority is accumulated by facing moral dilemmas and acting in accordance with one's ethical convictions. The Oversight Board confirmed this idea in its recent decision to uphold Facebook's suspension of then-President Donald Trump's account following the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, by openly decrying what it viewed as an attempt by Facebook to use the Board "to avoid its responsibilities."⁸² Zuckerberg can accumulate moral integrity by consulting with the Oversight Board prior to making a decision to suspend an account or remove content and then take full responsibility for his decisions. Dorsey can likewise exhibit sound moral principles by assume full responsibility for Twitter's review

⁷⁹ "What is the Oversight Board?" Facebook Help Center, Facebook, accessed January 29, 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/help/711867306096893_](https://www.facebook.com/help/711867306096893/_Oversight Board)Oversight Board, accessed January 29, 2021; <https://oversightboard.com/>.

⁸⁰ "About Verified Accounts," Help Center, Twitter, accessed January 30, 2021, <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/about-twitter-verified-accounts>; "Verification FAQ," Help Center, Twitter, accessed January 30, 2021, <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/twitter-verified-accounts>.

⁸¹ Vallor, *Technology*, 18.

⁸² "Case decision 2021-001-FB-FBR," Oversight Board, May 5, 2021, <https://oversightboard.com/decision/FB-691QAMHJ/>.

process instead of entrusting it to the decisions and biases of outside parties. As it is, the information oligarchs have outsourced their moral authority in a vain attempt to circumvent the very complex situations that would build their moral credibility.

Choose Your Own Narrative

Whereas social media has enabled the rise of the information oligarchy, so too has it provided other actors the ability to exercise power over society by using social media to craft and disseminate narratives that distort public knowledge. In an interview with NPR, Senator John Cornyn explained the commonly-held belief among politicians that the ability to craft the most compelling narrative is the key to obtaining political power.⁸³ Politicians have begun using social media to craft their narratives using fake news. Fake news, or fabricated content that is presented as if from legitimate sources, often for political gain, became a consistent feature of the social mediasphere following the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁸⁴ The point of fake news is to deceive, and it preys upon society's cognitive limitations and biases and evokes emotivism by stoking anger, fear, and disgust,⁸⁵ making it "far more difficult for the typical individuals to discern truth from fiction."⁸⁶ In a study published in the journal *Cognition*, Yale's Gordon Pennycook and David Rand confirmed a negative correlation between exposure to fake news and

⁸³ "Civics Secures Democracy Act Proposes Grants to Support Civics Education," NPR, heard on *Morning Edition*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/987099824/civics-secures-democracy-act-proposes-grants-to-support-civics-education>.

⁸⁴ Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand, "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 147, no. 12 (December 2018): 1865, <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000465>.

⁸⁵ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Toy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True And False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146, 1150, DOI: 10.1126/science.aap9559.

⁸⁶ Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media," *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (March 5, 2019): 750, <https://doi.org/10.1086/702233>.

cognitive reflection, or “the propensity to engage in analytical reasoning.”⁸⁷ One reason why is that fake news leverages the illusory truth effect where repetition of an item, regardless of plausibility, creates the perception that the item is true. For example, former president Trump understood the power of driving the narrative to manipulate public perception. He operationalized the term “Fake News,” using it more than 2,000 times in reference to journalists and traditional media during his four-year presidency. During the same period, *The Washington Post*’s Fact Checker database showed that Trump made slightly more than 20,000 “false or misleading claims.”⁸⁸ Trump was not alone in utilizing fake news for political advantage; fake news is a tool that is frequently used by actors on both sides of the political spectrum.⁸⁹ He understood perhaps better than most how to leverage the power of social media to decry fake news in order to craft a narrative that served his own purposes.

Social media has become a breeding ground for fake news and other forms of deception. Despite the fact that public trust in social media as a news source is low—as of 2017, only 5 and 12 percent of users trusted social media all or most of the time, respectively⁹⁰—almost one-half of American adults consumed news via social media on a daily basis in early 2020 with almost another third turning to social media for news with somewhat less regularity.⁹¹ This viewership-trust mismatch is an indication of power that was designed into social media to attract and hold our attention; we consistently flock to social media for knowledge even when we are inherently

⁸⁷ Gordon Pennycook and David Rand, “Lazy, Not Biased: Susceptibility to Partisan Fake News is Better Explained by Lack of Reasoning Than by Motivated Reasoning.” *Cognition* 188, (July 2019): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011>.

⁸⁸ Alex Woodward, “Fake news’: A Guide to Trump’s Favourite Phrase – And the Dangers it Obscures,” *Independent*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election/trump-fake-news-counter-history-b732873.html>.

⁸⁹ Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand, “Prior Exposure,” 1879.

⁹⁰ Ipsos, “Level of Trust in Selected Online News Sources in the United States as of June 2017,” July 11, 2017, Statista.

⁹¹ Hollywood Reporter and Morning Consult, “Frequency of News Consumption Via Social Media Among Adults in the United States as of March 2020,” March 25, 2020, Statista.

distrustful of it as a source. The disproportionate power relationship also limits choices and the opportunity that users have to acquire knowledge through the shrinking sphere of the “Daily Me.” Coined by Nicholas Negroponte, the Daily Me was meant to be a way for internet users to become more knowledgeable by tailoring the news content they saw based upon their individual interests and preferences. In practice, it enables the “epistemic closure” of rational thought, as social media pushes lopsided viewpoints and increasingly polarized political content to users that coincides with their world views.⁹² This content fuels confirmation bias in social media users, effectively limiting their ability of social media users to exercise their rights to sort rationally through complex societal issues in pursuit of the most moral outcome.

The Morality of the Mob

To fully participate in the freedoms of American democracy, individuals have a moral obligation to use their residual power—power that has not been consumed by the information oligarchs or twisted into narratives by political actors—to engage in robust discussions about important matters facing society.⁹³ However, social media is distorting this power by encouraging its misuse and corrupting the ethical foundations of the good life. The so-called cancel culture movement, for instance, was originally based on the ethical intention of empowering the disadvantaged to exercise moral rectitude by standing up to immoral behavior. Yet, the rapid adoption of social media as the cancel culture’s weapon of choice for calling out either perceived or real immoral behavior has far outpaced society’s ability to set, let alone acknowledge, general guidelines for its use. The Pew Research Center found that Americans are

⁹² Andrew Perrin, *American Democracy: From Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 39, 95.

⁹³ Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2011): 5, ProQuest.

divided largely along partisan lines about whether social media is an effective tool for enforcing moral accountability as part of cancel culture or is primarily a means for punishing those who fall afoul of the canceler's personal viewpoints.⁹⁴ This cleavage in public perception about cancel culture is further enforced by politicians who parrot party narratives. The confusion is allowing the moral designs of cancel culture to become hijacked by emotivism, which encourages virulent and often irrational online behaviors that are inconsistent with the moral flourishing of society.

Paradoxically, the spread of emotivism across into the cancel culture movement is in actuality limiting the ability of both the cancelers and their targets to exercise their liberties and individual rights in pursuit of the good life. It does this by “reduc[ing] the aesthetic dimensions of everything to a crude calculus of power and oppression.”⁹⁵ Social media has gifted cancel culture the power of amplifying everything from societal injustices, such as racism and sexual predatoriness, to personal grudges and vendettas for even the slightest perceived offense. But, as Rob Henderson writes in *Psychology Today*, emotivism has pushed cancel culture past the pale of legitimacy as it unleashes equal fury on the serious offender, minor transgressor, and innocents who are the targets of character assassinations.⁹⁶ The violent emotivism with which social media is inflaming cancel culture is exacting an overly high cost on society. It is stripping moral liberty from the targets of cancelation, who may be compelled to sacrifice their rights in an attempt to avoid the threats and intimidation that are becoming a staple of cancel culture on

⁹⁴ Emily Vogels et al., “Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment,” Pew Research Center, May 19, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>.

⁹⁵ Wesley Yang, “Post No Evil,” *Esquire* (May 2019): 22-24, ProQuest.

⁹⁶ Rob Henderson, “What Propels Cancel Culture?” *Psychology Today* 53, No. 2 (March/April 2020): 37, ProQuest.

social media. Additionally, it is stealing the individual rights of the cancelers to “think and judge on [their] own terms.”⁹⁷

Cancel culture is propelling a new morality based on a warped version of virtue ethics. Instead of creating an environment where individuals exercise the original ethical intention of bettering society through bringing egregiously immoral behavior to light, Henderson writes that “‘cancelling’ has become an entertaining hobby—an indulgent, dopamine-feeding activity”⁹⁸ that leverages the broadcast capabilities of social media to incite passions and forge a mob mentality. Instead of seeking to bring about meaningful social change, the mob mentality is fueled by various shades of egocentrism such as increasing the perceptions of one’s social and moral status, reducing the social and professional standing of others, and attempting to forge friendships and a sense of community in an increasingly impersonal digital world. By vociferously pointing out the flaws of others, bandwagon cancelers hope to increase their apparent moral credentials to gain credibility, status, and power within the mob hierarchy.⁹⁹ As individual cancelations wax and wane, such cancelers often feel compelled to continue their climb up the social hierarchy by looking for other cancel causes, which are increasingly delivered directly to their social media feeds by AI algorithms.¹⁰⁰ This desperate, passion-fueled grasp for short-term credibility gains limits the canceler from engaging in meaningful activities that build lasting moral character. Taken as a group, this mob mentality frustrates the flourishing of society and hinders the collective ability of society to attain the good life as envisioned by Socrates and in the tenets of American democracy.

⁹⁷ Yang, “Post No Evil,” 22-24.

⁹⁸ Robert Henderson, “The Atavism of Cancel Culture,” *City Journal*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.city-journal.org/cancel-culture>.

⁹⁹ Henderson, “Cancel Culture,” 37-38.

¹⁰⁰ Henderson, “Atavism.”

Future Problems, Current Solutions

Emerging technologies will exacerbate the technomoral challenges facing American democracy in the future. The U.S. National Security Commission on AI (NSCAI) projects a “gathering storm” as adversaries leverage AI and machine learning automated and semiautomated systems with the intention of manipulating the belief systems and behavioral patterns of American citizens.¹⁰¹ Automation and AI will play a more prominent role as machine-driven communications (MADCOM) tools will increasingly drive computational propaganda,¹⁰² providing foreign and domestic actors greater ability to deceive, influence, coerce, and otherwise influence American citizens across the social mediasphere.¹⁰³ Information Oligarchs will use similar AI to expand their power by using increasingly powerful AI tools to consume and operationalize even more knowledge about social media users and their human experiences. The cumulative effect of increased AI and MADCOMs usage for political, economic, and computational propaganda will complicate the technomoral fabric of the social mediasphere and will have a deleterious impact on the societal, political, and power structures of American democracy.

The projected (and ongoing) rise of the use of bots and MADCOMs for computational propaganda adds increased urgency to the need for current solutions for an emerging problem. Fortunately, the U.S. government, industry, and academia are currently laboring to propose and

¹⁰¹ *Final Report*, (Washington, D.C.: National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2021), 46.

¹⁰² The Oxford Internet Institute’s Computational Propaganda Project defines computational propaganda as “the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents and big data directed towards the manipulation of public opinion.” See Samuel Woolley, “Computational Propaganda and Political Bots: An Overview,” in *Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?: Bots, Echo Chambers, and Disinformation*, ed. Shawn Powers and Markos Kounalakis (Washington, DC: U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, May 1, 2017), 13.

¹⁰³ Matt Chessen, “The MADCOM Future: How Artificial Intelligence Will Enhance Computational Propaganda, Reprogram Human Culture, and Threaten Democracy...and What Can Be Done About It,” *The Atlantic Council* (2017), 2, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The_MADCOM_Future_RW_0926.pdf.

devise practical solutions that begin to address this vast and complex problem. The NSCAI, for instance, recently published its comprehensive Final Report to Congress that offers a clear warning of how AI is aiding malicious actors to exploit society through social media “weapons of mass influence”¹⁰⁴ and proposes concrete steps for “winning in the artificial intelligence era.”¹⁰⁵ The Commission’s Final Report outlines practical, actionable, technical solutions that are consistent with the U.S. government’s moral obligation to uphold individual liberties and to provide security for its citizenry. In his sobering seminal work on a potential social future dominated by MADCOMs, technologist Matt Chessen also proffered concise recommendations to mitigate the emerging risks.¹⁰⁶ The various way in which these technologies will be able to leverage social media to influence society will require further in-depth research. Nevertheless, government, technology, civil, and societal leaders should carefully study these recommendations and seriously consider their adoption.

The Operationalization of Ethics

There is an inherent danger in viewing the threats to American democracy from current and emerging social media technologies solely through a technical lens. As professor Adam Frank points out, these technologies are components of computational propaganda and were developed by human actors who recognized the potential that the intersection of social media and “Big” technologies, such as Data or Compute, would have on generating the power to influence human cognition and behaviors. Accordingly, any technological attempts to mitigate

¹⁰⁴ “The Final Report,” National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, accessed April 21, 2021, 47, <https://www.nsc.ai.gov/2021-final-report/>.

¹⁰⁵ “The National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence,” National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.nsc.ai.gov/>.

¹⁰⁶ Chessen, “MADCOM Future,” 4-5, 17-22.

“computational propaganda’s potentially dangerous effects on democracy” must therefore include a moral psychological aspect behind them.¹⁰⁷ In other words, Frank argues that the best, most comprehensive solutions to combat the threats of emerging social media technologies will necessarily include allowances for technomoral considerations.

Operationalizing ethics in the social mediasphere presents unique challenges, however. Adversaries and malign actors will continue to operate outside of any ethical or moral construct that aims to build up society as a whole. What is more, ethical thinking and behavior can be difficult to enforce, particularly in the free-for-all environment of social media. Government legislation and company policies can encourage or even mandate adherence to ethical practices, but they alone cannot guarantee ethical thinking or a desire to be ethical for ethics’ sake. True ethical behavior comes through self-enforcement, when a person chooses adherence to ethical guidelines out of a desire to do so instead of being compelled.¹⁰⁸ Adopting commonly accepted ethical ideals can promote the flourishing of society, strengthen the government’s moral obligation to ensure security and individual freedoms for its citizens, and buttress technical solutions deployed to protect American democracy. Any solutions need to be viewed pragmatically, with realistic expectation of the challenges and potential for limited success. To this end, the recommendations below are meant to spark ideas and debate about how American society can best promote ethical thought and behavior in the social mediasphere.

Recommendations

U.S. Government

¹⁰⁷ Adam Frank, “Computational Propaganda: Bots, Targeting and The Future,” 13.7 *Cosmos & Culture: Commentary on Science and Society*, *NPR*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2018/02/09/584514805/computational-propaganda-yeah-that-s-a-thing-now>.

¹⁰⁸ John Fletcher Moulton, “Laws and Manners,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 134, no.1 (July 1, 1924): 1-.

The United States needs to achieve technical superiority and reestablish its moral authority in order to survive in the fight against both foreign and domestic disinformation and computational propaganda. In addition to technical solutions, such as those proposed in the NSCAI Final Report, the government should enact smart legislation that is consistent with its moral obligation to secure the rights and liberties of American citizens. This includes restructuring Section 230 of the CDA to include updated language, clarifications, and stipulations that prioritize the rights of citizens and promote the equitable applications of CDA protections across all service providers. Congress should also pass serious privacy protection laws that return the power to individual users to understand and determine what is done with their data. The government needs to look ahead and study and research the challenges that emerging technologies will present, such as determining the application of First Amendment rights to AI-generated content on social media or to a citizen who further disseminates that content.

The government should also take the lead in promoting moral behavior by encouraging civic and media literacy. This includes investing resources in educating the public on how to recognize disinformation and fake news. Jankowicz also suggests that the U.S. Department of Education look at devoting resources to increasing media and digital literacy in school systems.¹⁰⁹ Senator Chris Coons also argued for the need to increase civics education, which is estimated to be lagging behind funding for STEM education in the United States by a factor of one thousand times.¹¹⁰ Without media literacy programs, rising generations are coming of age in the social mediasphere with a knowledge of how to use the technology but lacking the moral and

¹⁰⁹ Jankowicz, *Information War*, 219.

¹¹⁰ "Civics Secures Democracy Act Proposes Grants to Support Civics Education," NPR, heard on *Morning Edition*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/987099824/civics-secures-democracy-act-proposes-grants-to-support-civics-education>.

civil foundations necessary for its use. Social media can never enable its users to choose the good life if the government, social media companies, and society focus solely on technical aspects and not on how they fit into the flourishing of society.

Information Oligarchs

As wielders of immense knowledge, the information oligarchs need to acknowledge and act upon the moral obligation they assume in their mission statements to promote human flourishing by connecting and improving the world. The information oligarchs can boost their moral credibility in this regard by ensuring that they build what author and neurobiology researcher Juan Enriquez identified as “ethics, legitimacy, transparency, and accountability” into the systems they created.¹¹¹ To promote and cultivate ethical thought and behavior among their employees and users, they should establish easily accessible, outward facing websites that clearly explain the ethical and moral values driving the companies’ vision and operations.¹¹² For legitimacy, social media companies should operate on the principles of equality they claim to espouse. This may include equitable application of punitive measures against all content that violates code of conduct, requiring and producing ethical training for content reviewers, and adopting and rigorously employing ethical AI principles, such as IBM’s five focus areas,¹¹³ into their tool development processes.

¹¹¹ Juan Enriquez, “Right/Wrong: How Technology Transforms Our Ethics, with Juan Enriquez,” interview by Wendell Wallach, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, January 27, 2021, 59:56, video, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20210127-right-wrong-technology-transforms-ethics-juan-enriquez>

¹¹² An internet search for “Facebook and ethics” or “Twitter and ethics” conducted on April 21, 2020, using both Google and Bing search engines did not return any meaningful results that point to public-facing statements of the firms’ ethics policies.

¹¹³ IBM’s five focus areas for ethics in AI are explainability, fairness, robustness, transparency, and privacy. See “Focus Areas,” IBM, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.ibm.com/artificial-intelligence/ai-ethics-focus-areas>.

Social media companies need to provide more transparent and comprehensible explanations of how user information is being used and provide greater and easier access to privacy controls. For accountability, the information oligarchs need to consciously remove themselves from what Zuboff termed the dispossession cycle, which includes hollow public acknowledgements of responsibility for immoral behavior, feigned sorrow at having let user bases down, and making token gestures at reform.¹¹⁴ Instead, the information oligarchs can demonstrate their ethical intent by proactively implementing social media technologies and controls that enable users to exercise their rights to pursue the good life.

Society

As the foundational power of American democracy, citizens have a moral obligation to promote the flourishing of society. As Chessen points out, this means that users need to become educated about the technologies they use, how their information is being used, and what actions constitute “safe information-practices and create a social consensus” around appropriate behavior.¹¹⁵ Citizens should demand greater privacy protections and safeguards for individual liberties both from the government and from social media companies. They should also call for private and public initiatives to boost civil and social media literacy, such as the bipartisan initiative of Senators Coons and Cornyn to return civics and history to the U.S. education system.¹¹⁶ These types of initiatives are necessary for securing the moral foundation upon which societal and government structures operate and will ensure a robust American democracy.

¹¹⁴ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 141-155.

¹¹⁵ Chessen, “MADCOM Future,” 5, 21-22.

¹¹⁶ “Civics Secures Democracy Act Proposes Grants to Support Civics Education,” NPR, heard on *Morning Edition*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/987099824/civics-secures-democracy-act-proposes-grants-to-support-civics-education>.

Residents of the social mediasphere should reclaim their agency and right to act morally in pursuit of the good life by taking responsibility for their own ethical behavior. They should likewise demand ethical behavior from the government and social media companies. As Juan Enriquez humorously noted, most social media users do not go to sleep at night wondering how they can impinge upon the moral freedoms of their friends, neighbors, and community.¹¹⁷ Yet that is precisely what is happening when individuals create and spread immoral content on social media. True moral authority is acquired not by acting under the scrutinizing gaze of society, but by repeatedly making choices to act ethically in the face of moral dilemmas.

Finally, to ensure the flourishing of society, users must take responsibility for their own ethical behavior. This includes looking back at the fundamentals of moral agency as instructions on how to cope with current and future technomoral challenges. To this end, the Aristotelean virtues associated with the good life, such as kindness, honesty, temperance, patience, and courage, serve as guideposts for choosing a life that is worth wanting. Virtue ethics are well suited for the online social environment, as they promote users exercising their individual rights in a continuous cycle of development and improvement.¹¹⁸ That is, virtues can be learned, practiced, and honed through the morally ambiguous interactions on social media. Virtue ethics also afford users a standard for judging the morality of their own actions in relation to the balance, or the “golden mean,” between the vices of deficiency and excess. Adapted from a list of Aristotle’s golden mean prepared by Dr. Tom Creely, Director of the Ethics and Emerging Military Technology Program at the U.S. Naval War College, Figure 5 suggests ways in which a variety of virtues could be applied to social media interactions.

¹¹⁷ Juan Enriquez, “Right/Wrong.”

¹¹⁸ Richard Kraut, “Aristotle’s Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aristotle-ethics/>.

Figure 5. The Golden Mean of Social Media Virtues¹¹⁹

Vice (Defect)	Virtue (Mean)	Vice (Excess)
Cowardice, Lack of Confidence	Courage, Commitment, Proper Self-Confidence	Rashness, Overconfidence
Dishonesty, Unreliability, Disingenuous, Deviousness	Honesty, Truthfulness, Integrity, Reliability, Respect for Truth	Lack of Respect, Unteachability, Closed-Mindedness
Lack of Self-control	Self-Control, Discipline	Self-indulgence
Meanness, Stinginess, Selfishness	Liberality	Prodigality, Wastefulness
Improper Pride, boastfulness, blind optimism	Humility, Modesty	Empty Vanity, Aloofness
Rashness, Quick to anger	Even Temper	Apathy
Shamelessness	Modesty	Bashfulness
Surliness, Unkindness	Friendliness, Acceptance, Tolerance, Kindness	Flattery
Disrespect, Indifference	Proper Respect	Overly Deferential, Lack of Self-Respect

The social media golden mean matrix, which is not comprehensive of all possible virtues, affords individuals a means for assessing their own progress towards acquiring and exhibiting

¹¹⁹ Tom Creely, "Ethical Conduct for Leaders," email correspondence, April 18, 2021.

the moral conduct, thinking, and being that is fundamental to a strong, functioning, and flourishing society. For example, a person who finds themselves trending towards a deficiency or excess of a virtue can examine what social actions they are taking that encourage unethical behavior, such generating or viewing content that promotes emotivism. Future trends and technologies will challenge the concept of a virtuous society, however, as citizens determines how to fit and adapt emerging social media technologies into the good life. This will require participants in the social mediasphere to exercise more humility and forgiveness, which are two concepts Enriquez notes are conspicuously absent from much of societal discourse, especially in the social mediasphere.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, the diligent and concerted practice of these characteristics will lead users towards self-actualization and will help combat the rampant emotivism that is endemic to interaction in social media today.

Hope for the Good Life

These current and emerging threats paint a bleak picture of a dystopian future devoid of moral agency, where American democracy has submitted to the technological authoritarianism of social media. Foreign and domestic actors are promoting rampant emotivism by using social media to spread and amplify disinformation and to coopt socially salient movements, all with the goal of sowing distrust and disunity. Social media is being used to convolute the political structures the U.S. government relies upon to fulfill its moral obligations to provide security and protection of individual rights. American politicians are repurposing social media as a tool to

¹²⁰ Juan Enriquez, "How Technology Changes Our Sense of Right and Wrong," November 2020, TED2020, video, 7:17, https://www.ted.com/talks/juan_enriquez_how_technology_changes_our_sense_of_right_and_wrong.

promote ideological agendas, wage political warfare, and exert undue power and influence, all with the implicit, if not explicit support of the social media companies. The information oligarchs are leveraging their positions in the social mediasphere to impinge the rights of the American people to acquire and exercise the power that comes through knowledge. American citizens are sacrificing their rights to rational thought at the altar of emotivism. To complicate matters, emerging social media technologies pose additional threats through the introduction of more sophisticated AI-enabled tools and computational propaganda. All of these attack vectors are underpinned by corroding societal morals and virtues that are prerequisites for choosing the good life.

There is hope for American democracy in the age of social media. As professor David Nye asserts, technology is not deterministic and it is society's collective cultural, ethical, and moral choices that shape how we use technology.¹²¹ Despite the increasing moral turmoil in the social mediasphere, the ultimate power still resides with the people in the form of individual and collective choice—the power to choose to exercise moral agency, to employ rational thought, and to choose the good life. Virtue ethics underpin this power and serve as time-tested moral guideposts for navigating the moral and emotional quagmire of the social mediasphere. Virtue ethics also offer a way for society to set free from Pandora's Box the hope that social media can be a primary mechanism for the flourishing of society rather than for shackling American democracy with self-interest, dishonesty, and the lust for monetization and power. American society deserves better and it is time for citizens to grasp the good life by practicing the virtues necessary to achieve it.

¹²¹ David Nye, *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 21.

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