

CHAPTER 4

Facebook's Response to Its Democratic Discontents

Quality Initiatives, Ideology and Education's Role

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Introduction

From the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, academic, journalistic and corporate rhetoric linked digital social media to democratic affordances that advanced the quality of public sphere communication by empowering users to voice their concerns, listen to others' views and engage in democratic debate with contesting positions on shared problems (e.g. Grossman 2006; Twist 2006; Shirky 2011; Gainous & Wagner 2013; Al-Jenaibi 2014; Hermida 2014; Bruns & Highfield 2016). However, there has been increasing concern and discontent in the last few years among a wide array of academics with the discourse of social media as a democratizing force advancing public sphere communication (e.g. Golumbia 2013; Allmer 2014; Fuchs 2014; Lovink 2016; Pasquale 2017; Sunstein 2017). This discontent has spread to digital media journalists and activists, and thereby to politicians, policymakers and publics at large throughout the world, after revelations of significant problems with the quality of social

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media content and engagement during and after the 2016 US presidential election, the Brexit vote and other less publicized (in the West) elections, such as the 2016 Philippine general election, as well as revelations of social media's association with sectarian violence in Myanmar and elsewhere (Cellan-Jones 2017; Faris et al. 2017; Reed & Kuchler 2018; Taub & Fisher 2018a; Taub & Fisher 2018b). These problems include sensationalist 'clickbait' linking readers to 'junk' news and advertising sites, hate speech and incitement of violence, trolling and harassment, flame wars, political bias in content ranking by algorithms and moderators, misinformation and conspiracy theories going viral, 'echo chamber' reinforcement and debate polarization, and targeted disinformation campaigns exploiting users' personal data (Deb et al. 2017; Faris et al. 2017; *The Economist* 2017; Bradshaw & Howard 2018; Fiegerman 2018; Reed & Kuchler 2018; Taub & Fisher 2018a; 2018b). In all, very serious questions have been raised, and much discontent expressed by academics, journalists, politicians and advertisers about the quality of social media communication vis-à-vis what is expected of democratic public sphere communication.

At the heart of the concern and discontent has been Facebook, which is not only the most dominant social media platform in terms of user attention, but has also been heavily implicated in much of the social media public sphere quality problems and associated discontent. As such, I take Facebook to be the key, if not the representative, case to begin any exploration of the discontents around social media and the public sphere.

Facebook's quality problems with respect to advancing democratic public sphere communication are now well documented and explored by journalists and academics (Tufeki 2016; Owen 2017; Pasquale 2017; PBS 2018; Pickard 2017; Batorski & Grzywińska 2018; Reed & Kuchler 2018; Taub & Fisher 2018a; Taub & Fisher 2018b). What has been less examined is Facebook's response to the public revelation of, and critical reactions to, these problems and the effectiveness of this response in addressing the problems. This response has taken the form of a public relations campaign, centred around an ongoing stream of announcements of what I am calling quality initiatives.¹ These initiatives purport to address, if not to totally fix, among other things, problems with the quality of public sphere-oriented communication made visible by Facebook.

Hence, a first question in this chapter will be: How has Facebook responded, since the 2016 US presidential elections, to its quality problems vis-à-vis quality public sphere communication? To answer this question, the second section of this chapter provides a summary of Facebook's quality initiatives for the two years between December 2016 and December 2018, that is, from just after the 2016 US presidential election, when media reports forced its CEO (Mark Zuckerberg) and management to publicly acknowledge that the platform had significant quality problems to deal with, until the time when I concluded research for this chapter. To develop the summary, I drew centrally from Facebook's 'newsroom' announcements, archived at newsroom.fb.com. I also referred to Facebook representatives' statements found within their Facebook page posts (mostly Zuckerberg's), interviews (e.g. Bickert & Zittrain 2018; Klein 2018;

Swisher 2018; Thompson 2018), conference speeches (e.g. Zuckerberg 2018e) and responses in official government hearings (e.g. Bickert 2018a; Facebook 2018; Sandberg 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c; 2018d). My summary is not a complete and detailed inventory of all of Facebook's quality initiatives, but rather a selective review of those initiatives that are directly of relevance to the quality of public sphere communication, although these do in fact account for the large majority of the quality initiatives announced during the past couple of years.

One important concern of many commentators, particularly those influenced by critical political economy analysis, which has *not* been explicitly or positively attended to by these initiatives is that the targeted-advertising revenue model adopted by Facebook to maximize profits (and growth) has a negative impact on the quality of communication with respect to the public sphere (Pickard 2017; Vaidhyanathan 2018). Hence, a second and a third research question follows: How precisely does Facebook's revenue model negatively impact the quality of communication as judged by public sphere norms? And, how do Facebook's quality initiatives attend to, if at all, this negative impact? In the third section of this chapter 'The Political Economy Problem and the Initiatives' Ideological Response?', I investigate these two questions. After outlining 'the political economy problem', including summarizing the negative impact of Facebook's revenue model on the quality of communication with respect to the public sphere, I highlight how Facebook's quality initiatives do in fact address the problem, but only in the negative sense of working to ideologically mask it.

The answers to the first three questions then lead, in combination with this book's theme, to a fourth and final question: What should be done in education to address Facebook's impoverishment of online public sphere communication via its targeted-advertising revenue model, and what should be education's response to the ideological masking by Facebook's initiatives of this impoverishment?

Before proceeding with the investigation of these questions, I need to clarify how the public sphere is conceived of in this chapter. I draw on a broadly Habermasian normative conception, given that it is most often assumed in digital media research and much democratic theory. Here, the public sphere is understood as a communicative space constituted by disagreement and debate over common problems, where the debate is ideally inclusive, informed, reflexive, reasoned, contestatory yet respectful, and free from state and market influence (Habermas 1989; 1992; 2006; Dahlberg 2018). Such communication enables the formation of critical publics—questioning, deliberative, self-reflexive—and associated public opinions that can hold formal decision-making processes democratically accountable (Habermas 1989; 1992; 2006).

Facebook's Quality Initiatives

This section provides a non-chronological summary of Facebook's quality initiatives that are directly relevant to public sphere communication and which were announced and initiated between December 2016 and December 2018.

I will organize the summary by following Facebook's pithy 'recipes' for 'cleaning up' its platform—'remove, reduce, inform' (Lyons 2018c) and 'amplify the good and mitigate the bad' (Zuckerberg 2018g)—although I will add 'detect' as one other key and distinct action of Facebook's quality initiatives that precedes 'remove,' 'reduce,' 'inform' and 'promote.' I thus start by discussing initiatives oriented to detecting and removing 'bad' actors and 'bad' communication from the platform. I then look at initiatives aimed at reducing the visibility of certain types of communication deemed not bad enough to be simply removed from the platform, and at associated measures to identify such communication. I subsequently describe actions aimed at enhancing the visibility of communication deemed by Facebook to be good quality. Finally, I summarize efforts aimed at informing users and other actors of any issues with the particular communications that they are engaging or associated with, and how they can deal with these communications.

First, one of Facebook's initial, and constantly reiterated, quality measures was to simply turn to its 'real name' rule and promise to more proactively and thus quickly block, disable or take down 'inauthentic' accounts, pages and groups (Stamos 2017; Sandberg 2018). This action against 'fake identities' is touted by Facebook as central in targeting and removing the accounts and communication of domestic and foreign political actors spreading, whether organically or through Facebook's targeted-advertising system, disinformation, polarizing propaganda and hate speech, as well as stopping economic actors using fake accounts for spamming purposes (Stamos 2017; Gleicher 2018; Sandberg 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c; 2018f).

Second, Facebook said it would increase its efforts in the proactive take down of any communication, even when coming from 'authentic' identities, that violates its Community Standards,² which are seen as, among other things, promoting civil and respectful communication on the platform (Zuckerberg 2017a; 2018f; Bickert 2018a). Facebook has also stated that it would more strictly enforce the removal from its platform of severe or repeat violators of its Community Standards (Facebook Newsroom 2018b; Gleicher 2018).

Third, and turning to detection efforts, in a well-publicized initiative to increase the identification of 'inauthentic' accounts and content violating Community Standards, and thus in support of the take downs promised in the two initiatives summarized above, Zuckerberg (2017b) committed to double the number of people working on 'safety and security.' This work includes everything from engineering technical systems so as to better identify fake accounts and terrorism threats to reviewing user and artificial intelligence (AI) flagged content³ for violations of Facebook's Community Standards (Bickert 2018a; Silver 2018). By mid-2018, Facebook claimed to have fulfilled this promise by taking the number of people working in these areas from 10,000 to over 20,000 (Sandberg 2018), and by the end of 2018 Zuckerberg (2018f) announced that this number had been increased to 30,000, of which 15,000 were content reviewers based globally (Bickert & Zittrain 2018).

Fourth, furthering its detection actions, Facebook placed AI—including machine learning and computer vision—at the centre of its strategy to not only proactively identify fake accounts and violations of community standards, but to predict the existence on its platform of other types of low-quality communication such as clickbait and misinformation, whose subsequent demotion in visibility will be discussed in the next initiative (Facebook Newsroom 2018a; Gleicher 2018; Lyons 2018a; Sandberg 2018; Thompson 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c). Facebook says it is now detecting such low-quality forms of communication not only in text, but increasingly in photos and video, by using technologies like optical character recognition (Lyons 2018b; Woodford 2018).

Fifth, and turning now specifically to demotion rather than take-down actions, Facebook announced, 'in an effort to support an informed community' and in line with providing 'authentic communication', an increased effort to reduce the visibility of financially driven 'clickbait' (Babu et al. 2017). Clickbait here refers to posts that contain provocative headlines and visuals designed to seduce users into clicking on hyperlinks that lead to advertisement-filled websites outside Facebook that only provide 'low-quality'—and sometimes 'false' or 'hoax'—news and information (Babu et al. 2017; Mosseri 2017). According to Facebook's spokespeople, clickbait is identified with the help of machine learning and demoted algorithmically in user News Feeds, undermining its visibility and subsequent spread and thus the advertising money received, thereby disincentivizing its production and publication (Babu et al. 2017; Facebook 2018; Sandberg 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c). In addition, Facebook announced that it would—in the name of a 'more informative' experience—be lowering the visibility of any post, not just those using clickbait, that links to a 'low-quality web page experience' outside of Facebook, in other words, that links to a web page which is 'low in substantive content' and high in 'disruptive, shocking and malicious ads' (Lin & Guo 2017). It needs to be noted that this initiative applies to organic posts and not to advertising. Advertising on Facebook that links users to sites with 'low-quality web page experience' outside the platform is to be simply blocked rather than demoted in visibility (Lin & Guo 2017).

Sixth, to aid the detection of misinformation, and as one of its first responses to charges of spreading 'fake news' on its platform during the 2016 US presidential election, Facebook started a third-party fact-checking programme. By April 2019, Facebook was 'partnering' with 52 'independent' fact-checkers in 33 countries (Funke 2019b). 'Partners' such as Factcheck.org review and rate the accuracy of articles, photos and videos posted on Facebook that have been predicted to be false by a machine-learning classifier (Mosseri 2016a; Zuckerberg 2016; Zuckerberg 2017a; Facebook Newsroom 2018a). Facebook says that it then significantly reduces the visibility on News Feed of stories that are 'rated as false', cutting future 'views' by on average of more than 80 per cent (Lyons 2018a; see also Sandberg 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c). Facebook also announced

that it would be using these ratings to take action against actors who repeatedly get ‘false’ ratings on content they share, de-prioritizing their content and removing advertising and monetization rights (Shukla & Lyons 2017; Stamos 2017; Lyons 2018c). Moreover, Facebook stated that it would disallow advertisers from running ‘ads that link to stories that have been marked false by third-party fact-checking organizations’ (Shukla & Lyons 2017).

Seventh, continuing to expand its outsourcing of misinformation detection, Facebook turned to its users not only to report what they believe to be violations of its Community Standards (e.g. harassment, hate speech and nudity), as it has done for a number of years, but also to flag what they believe to be false news stories (Facebook Newsroom 2018a). This user reporting is fed, along with many other signals, into a machine-learning classifier, as mentioned above, that predicts dubious stories for third-party fact-checkers to then assess the veracity of (Facebook Newsroom 2018a). Facebook is now also checking user comments on stories for signals of false news, for example ‘phrases that indicate readers don’t believe the content is true’ (Facebook Newsroom 2018a).

Eighth, to support user judgment of the veracity of news articles, in early 2018, Facebook launched (starting in the United States) a ‘news context’ initiative to provide various types of contextual information (where available) on the news stories that it spreads (Hughes et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2018). A ‘context button’ enables this feature, which is to be rolled out globally from the end of 2018 (Hughes et al. 2018). The contextual information provided varies depending on what is available for an article, but the possibilities include: a list of links to ‘related articles’, a description of the publisher that includes links (where available) to the publisher’s Wikipedia page and to other articles posted by the publisher, any fact-checking reviews available on the story, and information about how much the article has been shared on Facebook, where it has been shared and which of one’s ‘friends’ have shared the article (Hughes et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2018). In addition, users about to share an article, or who have shared the article, are warned via a pop-up notification if an article’s claims have been disputed by a fact-checker assessment (Smith et al. 2018; Zigmund 2018). This initiative is likely to evolve and the specific information provided change, but the general goal will remain, which is not only to inform, but also to ‘empower’ users in coming to their own individual decisions about the ‘credibility’ and ‘accuracy’ of the news they see (Smith et al. 2018), and hence ‘empower’ users in making ‘smart choices’ (Simo 2017) about ‘what news to read, trust, and share’ (Zigmund 2018). Thus, showing the context of stories can also be conceived as ‘helping people sharpen their social media literacy’ (Chakrabarti 2018), which leads us to the next ‘inform’-related initiative.

Ninth, Facebook launched a global ‘news literacy campaign’ after the 2016 elections, with various ‘updates’ since, to further ‘empower’ users to judge for themselves the quality (including veracity) of content that the intermediary, and others, makes visible to them (Hegeman 2018; Zigmund 2018). This news

literacy campaign, in partnership with third-party (digital) news literacy organizations such as the News Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom (Bickert 2018a), started by providing users with 'tips'⁴ to recognize false or misleading news and information. These 'tips' have been publicized not only online, but also through mass media and other offline advertising, particularly around national elections, for example around the 2017 UK national parliamentary elections (BBC 2017). The news literacy initiative has expanded into education in schools: for example, Monika Bickert (2018a), Facebook's head of global policy management, reported to a British parliamentary hearing on 'fake news' that Facebook has 'digital ambassadors in schools talking about, among other things, how to recognize false news'. And on 2 August 2018, Facebook announced the launch of its 'Digital Literacy Library, a collection of lessons to help young people think critically and share thoughtfully online' (Davis & Nain 2018).

Tenth, under sustained pressure from a range of governments about the use of Facebook's targeted-advertising system for damaging democratic discourse around elections, in May 2018 Facebook announced (for the United States at first and then for the United Kingdom, Brazil and India by the end of 2018) a 'political' advertising transparency initiative in line with its initiatives to 'inform' and thus 'empower' users and other actors (Leathern 2018). This initiative pre-empts, as Zuckerberg declared during Senate hearings on 10 April 2018, the digital political advertising 'transparency' rules under development by UK and European Parliament and US Congress. Facebook announced that the initiative would make 'political' advertising more transparent by: identifying as 'Political Ad' those advertisements deemed to be running 'electoral' or 'issue-based' content (Goldman & Himmel 2018); disclosing to viewers via a 'paid for by' label on the political advertisement who paid for it (Chakrabarti 2018; Leathern 2018); making available, through the 'paid for by' label, a searchable archive with further information on any 'political' advertisement, information such as 'the campaign budget associated with an individual ad and how many people saw it—including their age, location and gender' (Leathern 2018); and 'making it possible to see on any advertiser's page any (not just "political") advertisements they're currently running' (Chakrabarti 2018; also see Goldman & Himmel 2018). In March 2019, Facebook announced that this transparency initiative would be expanded to all advertisements (Shukla 2019).

Eleventh, in terms of action to 'promote' the 'good', complementing actions already discussed to delete or demote the 'bad', in early 2018, Facebook announced two major updates to the elements Facebook positively values in its News Feed algorithmic ranking of 'high quality' communication, which is one factor that determines the visibility of a story with respect to any particular user. The first major update was to add value and thus visibility to 'meaningful' social interaction or 'engagement' (such as comments, shares, reactions and time spent on posts) between 'friends-and-family' in contrast to 'public content' from brands, including from news organizations (Mosseri 2018a; Zuckerberg 2018b). The visibility of branded news content, while being overall

reduced in News Feeds, was to be advanced when stimulating such friends and family ‘engagement’ (Mosseri 2018a). The second major update aimed at ensuring ‘News Feed promotes high quality news’ was to ‘prioritize news that is trustworthy, informative, and local’ (Zuckerberg 2018a). ‘Trustworthy’ and ‘personally informative’ news have long been valued in the News Feed as being of high quality (Kacholia 2013), but these elements are now being further emphasized: more value and thus more visibility is being given to news that is reported by users as coming from user-ranked ‘broadly trusted sources’ (Mosseri 2018b; Zuckerberg 2018a) and to news that is ‘personally informative’, which, as with ‘trusted sources’, comes from user ‘quality survey’ feedback (Mosseri 2016b; Xu, Lada & Kant 2016; Mosseri 2018b). The boosting of the visibility of ‘local’ news with respect to a particular user—news that is deemed to be of high quality because assumed to be more relevant, informative and community-oriented—was enacted first in the United States in January 2018, but has since March 2018, according to Facebook, been expanded globally (Hardiman & Brown 2018; Mosseri 2018b). This boosting of local news visibility responds to the great concern expressed for a number of years now by journalists, activists and academics, about the devastation of local reportage and readership with attention and advertising turning to digital platforms, particularly to Facebook (Bell & Owen 2017).

The twelfth and final Facebook quality initiative that I will summarize is the ‘Facebook Journalism Project’ (FJP). Announced by Facebook in early January 2017, FJP clearly responds to both the discontent about the content amplified by Facebook during the 2016 US presidential election and to the concerns expressed over a number of years, as noted at the end of the previous initiative’s summary, that Facebook negatively impacts on quality journalism. FJP, according to its launch announcement, is to operate as a ‘hub’ for all of Facebook’s ‘efforts to promote and support journalism on Facebook’ (Simo 2017). As such, FJP incorporates some of the actions discussed in other initiatives, including those boosting local journalism, discouraging misinformation, promoting trustworthy and personally informative news, and advancing digital news literacy. As with a number of the other quality initiatives, FJP contains a package of sub-initiatives that are being added to with time.⁵ FJP’s remit centrally includes raising the quality of, and the trust in, journalism, as well as improving news literacy among readers. FJP’s advertised aim is to work with media partners to create new products, provide (largely Facebook) tools and training for journalists to effectively use Facebook for news gathering and storytelling, and help ‘give people information so they can make smart choices about the news they read’ (Simo 2017). It does not matter that the details of the project and its sub-projects cannot be discussed here due to space limitations. What is important to note is that the claim of the FJP is to improve the quality of news and news literacy, which will then (purportedly) have a positive impact on the quality of news seen by Facebook users and upon their news literacy.

The Political Economy Problem and the Initiatives' Ideological Response

While it is too soon to assess the success of the initiatives, initial academic and journalistic research and analysis associated with these points to ongoing quality issues with Facebook communication in relation to public sphere ideals. These quality issues include: lack of transparency about algorithmic ranking and take-down decisions; failure to deal with echo-chambers and group polarization; bias in algorithmic curating and third-party fact-checking; and limited effectiveness in dealing with false news, conspiracy theories and hate speech (Fiegerman 2018; Fisher 2018; Gillespie 2018; Guess et al. 2018; Koebler & Cox 2018; Levin 2018; Reed & Kuchler 2018; Taub & Fisher 2018a; Taub & Fisher 2018b).

In contrast, Facebook reports from its own metrics and research evidence that the initiatives are already having success. For example, as seen in initiatives one and six above, Facebook reports blocking millions of attempts to register fake accounts every day and reducing the reach of news rated as false by fact-checkers by 'on average 80%'. The numbers that Facebook regularly cites with respect to its actions against low-quality communication, especially in its public relations rebuttals of critical media reportage, are often very impressive in themselves. For example, Nathaniel Gleicher (2018), Facebook's Head of Cybersecurity Policy, reports that 'we took down 837 million pieces of spam and 2.5 million pieces of hate speech and disabled 583 million fake accounts globally in the first quarter of 2018'. These numbers are not independently verified, and the 80 per cent visibility demotion of news rated as false, which has been constantly heard from Facebook representatives since early 2018, has been questioned by one of Facebook's own fact-checking partners, Snopes (O'Brien 2018).⁶ However, there *is* some 'independent' evidence from academic and journalist research, which Facebook public relations eagerly reports, of some early success for Facebook's quality initiatives, particularly reduction of the diffusion of misinformation (e.g. Allcott et al. 2018; Resnick et al. 2018; Guess et al. 2019; Pennycook & Rand 2019). And media producers themselves, including 'junk news' producers, report some quality-advancing effects resulting from Facebook implementing its recent initiatives (O'Brien 2018).

Moreover, Facebook makes out that it is not only willing and able to address all its quality problems, but that it can also be trusted to be open about the process, including by admitting difficulties and even errors along the way. Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg and other spokespeople talk of the enormity, complexity and challenge of the task, and that it will take time to address the problems, and in fact that this addressing will be ongoing since new and unforeseen problems will arise (Sandberg 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c; Zuckerberg 2018d; Zuckerberg 2018f). Indeed, Facebook spokespeople have stated that there are 'limits' (Lyons 2018a) to what is possible to moderate for due to the 'operational

constraints' of 'a system this size' (Bickert in Bickert & Zittrain 2018). Facebook has, moreover, performed with integrity by announcing the existence of errors in its quality processes that need to be attended to, admitting, for instance, to a 10 per cent error in its content reviewer checks (Zuckerberg 2018f).

Furthermore, Facebook regularly announces new or revamped quality initiatives in response to any new quality problems and to those errors that it admits to making. For example, it recently announced that it was expanding its appeals process in response to mistakes in take-downs resulting from content reviews (Bickert 2018b). As Bickert (cited in Bickert & Zittrain 2018) explains, 'at our scale, with more than 2 billion people and millions of reports coming in, we are not going to get it right every time, so that is why we have now built out appeals ... which will be expanded [during 2019 and 2020] to all policy violations' and will 'help us find mistakes that we are making, and improve our technology, review process, and policies.' Hence, Facebook *seems* to be attending to, as far as it can, all its quality problems.

However, there is a fundamental 'political economy' problem impeding the advancement of quality public sphere communication through Facebook, a problem which has been pointed to for some time by political economy-informed commentators (Owen 2017; Pickard 2017; Tufeki 2016; Vaidhyanathan 2018), but which the platform's quality initiatives *seem* to avoid addressing, despite their apparent comprehensibility. This problem is, to sum it up in one sentence, that Facebook's profit-driven targeted-advertising revenue model has a generally negative impact on the quality of communication as judged by typical public sphere normative standards. In what follows, I will first tease out the logic of this political economy problem, thus answering the second research question specified in this chapter's introduction, which asks how precisely Facebook's revenue model negatively impacts the quality of communication as judged by public sphere norms. I subsequently respond to the third question, which asks how, if at all, Facebook's quality initiatives attend to the political economy problem.

The targeted-advertising revenue model adopted by Facebook to secure maximum profit demands maximizing the production and collection of user data by, in turn, maximizing the production of user 'engagement', which is defined and operationalized in the platform as 'data producing user actions'. Such 'engagement' is in turn advanced by the configuring of all communication on the platform so as to make most visible to each user the communication that they are most likely to 'engage' with, which is predicted from the behavioural data gathered on each user. This configuring of communication, with its consequent incentivizing of particular content production and publication, is achieved by Facebook's various visibility control mechanisms, most notably its News Feed algorithms, but also its interface design and range of notifications and other prompts.

The type of communication that research shows is most readily 'engaged' with, and thus that is systematically made visible by the Facebook platform, is on the

whole compromising of public-sphere-defined quality communication, even when taking into account the effects of the quality initiatives (Owen 2017; Guess et al. 2018; Vaidhyanathan 2018). Advertising also negatively impacts the quality of public sphere communications, as recognized by public sphere theory (asserting the need for autonomy from market influence) and critical political economy influenced communication scholars, but *not* recognized by many other media commentators. The types of poor quality public sphere communication amplified by 'engagement' maximizing and targeted advertising can be classified for heuristic purposes in terms of the (public sphere-judged) quality of content and the (public sphere-judged) quality of interaction, as I will now quickly do.

With respect to the public sphere-judged quality of *content*, Facebook's 'engagement' maximizing-targeted advertising system tends to amplify content, for any particular user that: is personally oriented, in contrast to being publicly oriented content that broaches contentious issues of common concern; targets an individual user's own particular point of view and identity, rather than confronting users with contrasting views, and is thus reinforcing of echo-chambers and confirmation bias; is easily consumed (e.g. memes), not demanding thought and self-reflection; is commercially oriented, through paid-for content; is emotional-reaction-inducing in contrast to fostering reasoned consideration;⁷ is dogmatic rather than open; and is self-promoting rather than publicly oriented (Batorski & Grzywińska 2018; Guess et al. 2018; Vaidhyanathan 2018; Hoffmann, Taylor & Bradshaw 2019). Of course, these 'low quality' elements are only evaluated as such as the result of applying public sphere norms, and would be evaluated otherwise if applying norms of, say, strategic communication or personal welfare. But the public sphere is the focus here with respect to Facebook's claims to be a democratizing medium.

With respect to the public sphere-judged quality of *interaction*, despite the emphasis through quality initiative eleven on amplifying 'meaningful' interaction, interactions are still systematically understood in terms of 'engagement', which is defined and operationalized through the platform's technology as 'data producing user actions', which means those discrete and quantifiable 'actions' of individual users. This non-deliberative understanding of engagement is systematically designed into the platform through a range of buttons, including 'reaction' (which explicitly equates engagement with non-deliberative action), 'share', 'comment', 'confirm friend', 'hide post' and 'report' buttons. These and other buttons not only enable data-producing actions, but also ensure the perpetuation of such (inter-)actions by feeding users dopamine hits via displaying on a user's interface the number of 'reactions' to, and comments on, their posts (Hwang et al. 2018). As such, Facebook engagement constitutes subjects not as deliberative publics, but as Pavlovian individuals, as stimulus-response conditioned actors. Advertising, in turn, works to produce similar types of non-deliberative interaction and subjects.

Facebook architecture is in fact, as Vaidhyanathan (in Glaser & Oremus 2018) argues, drawing from his rigorous political economy analysis of the platform

(see Vaidhyanathan 2018), ‘terrible for deliberation’ even if ‘good for organization (like the Arab Spring)’. Despite political discussion having gravitated to the platform, its interface is ‘not designed well for people to interact with each other in a respectful, responsible way, to keep a line of argument going, [and] to be able to respond to nuances in a line of argument’ (Vaidhyanathan, in Glaser & Oremus 2018). This lack of attention to deliberation and focus on individual actions is clearly seen in the architecture of Facebook’s comment section below posts that offers the most obvious place where publicly oriented user-to-user interaction might be found on the platform. Even when articles initially shared are of ‘high quality,’ the structure of the comments space means that users tend to only see, and thus respond or react to, the last comment made, and thus any *reasonable* comments quickly get lost. Hence, on Facebook, in-depth arguments are systematically ruled out, and instead of ‘deep conversation,’ we find ‘cacophony’ (Vaidhyanathan, in Glaser & Oremus 2018; see also Vaidhyanathan 2018).

As well as driving low-quality types of content and interaction, as judged against public sphere norms, ‘engagement’ maximizing and advertising consumption undermine public sphere communication by driving inequalities of participation—some voices will be systematically favoured over others to the degree that they engender ‘engagement’ and/or pay for visibility. This is in contrast to the ideal of an inclusive public sphere.

We can conclude that, while Facebook argues that it values quality/democracy-advancing communication and is promoting such through its platform (particularly via its new quality initiatives), the platform continues to amplify much low-quality public sphere communication both by rewarding with visibility the types of content that stimulate ‘engagement’ and by displaying hyper-personalized advertising. The quality initiatives may have a moderating effect on poor quality communication—when not themselves exacerbating it (as the friends-and-family interaction measure summarized in initiative eleven may be doing by amplifying the visibility of sensationalist, privatized and echo-chamber communication). But, overall, the ‘engagement’ and targeted-advertising maximizing imperatives—which have not been altered by the quality initiatives—will tend to drive down quality as understood by public sphere norms. This conclusion clearly parallels Habermas’ (1989; 2006) argument that a media revenue model that relies on advertising will drive down the quality of communication in the public sphere not only by contaminating public sphere communication with the strategic communication of marketing, but also by being dependent on maximizing distribution so as to maximize attention to this marketing. The idea here is that there is a fundamental contradiction between a profit-driven advertising revenue model and advancing quality public sphere communication. This contradiction is only exacerbated when this revenue model becomes a data-reliant, hyper-personalized marketing system that demands ever more ‘engagement’ and targets advertisements ever more seductively. As such, democratic discontent with Facebook and corporate social media is well founded.

The political economy problem discussed above has been raised not only by academic critics (as referenced above), but also increasingly by journalists (e.g. Klein 2018; PBS 2018; Swisher 2018), and, most worryingly for Facebook, by politicians and regulators (e.g. Facebook 2018; Sandberg 2018; Zuckerberg 2018c; Zuckerberg 2018d). Hence the third research question asked in the introduction: how do Facebook's quality initiatives attend to, if at all, the political economy problem—the negative impact of Facebook's profit-driven targeted-advertising revenue model on the quality of public sphere communication?

As noted above, Facebook's quality initiatives do not *seem* to attend to the platform's political economy problem at all. This is because the initiatives do not openly or positively respond to the problem in the sense of performing any amendments to Facebook's revenue model so as to reduce, if not eliminate, the platform's negative impact on quality public sphere communication. However, the initiatives do in fact strongly attend, or at least react, to the political economy problem in an *ideological* way: Facebook's quality initiatives, through their very performance of addressing the quality issues, work to 'fix' the negative relation between the platform's revenue model and quality public sphere communication by attempting to simply make this impact disappear. How do Facebook's initiatives work to enact such disappearing? The remainder of this section will consider four general ways in which they do so.

First, Facebook's impressive array and seemingly constant stream of announcements of quality initiatives—announcements that are accompanied by a combination of technical details from managers and idealistic rhetoric from CEO Zuckerberg—suggests that Facebook is exploring all possible solutions to, and hence causes of, the quality problems, a suggestion which conceals the negative impact of the targeted-advertising model on public sphere communication.

Second, by promising to amplify 'good' communication and to eliminate or demote 'bad' communication, the initiatives suggest that what will be most visible to Facebook users is quality communication, thus indicating compatibility between the communications that Facebook's targeted-advertising system then makes visible and quality (including public sphere) communication. However, the version of 'quality' articulated by Facebook's initiatives' naming of 'good' and 'bad' communication leaves aside, and indeed obscures, some normative elements that are generally considered in public sphere theory to be central to any public sphere conception, including, reasoning, reflexivity, respectful contestation between different positions and autonomy from commercial (including advertising) influence. These left out and obscured elements, as it so happens, do not tend to be supported, and are in fact often undermined, by Facebook's targeted-advertising revenue model. As such, the exclusion and obscuring here operate ideologically by enabling identity between Facebook's communication and (a very questionable conception of) quality public sphere communication.

Third, the naming and attempted elimination of not only 'bad' communication but also associated 'bad' (undemocratic) actors external to Facebook's

system—foreign political propagandists, trolls, clickbait advertisers, rogue developers, fake account holders and hate-speech peddlers—positions the corporation as a ‘good’ actor protecting democratic communication from outside threats. This positioning will be ongoing because, as Facebook’s spokespeople (e.g. Leathern 2018; Zuckerberg 2018g) repeatedly emphasize and thus clearly want us to know, quality problems will persist since Facebook is up against ‘smart, creative, and well-funded adversaries who change their tactics as we spot abuse’ (Leathern 2018), which requires Facebook, as a good actor, to constantly develop new and/or updated quality initiatives. This naming of the perpetrators of bad communications, and the associated positioning of Facebook and its communications as good, obscures how the platform’s own system tends to drive the quality of public sphere communication lower.

Fourth, turning to Facebook’s relation to its users, the quality initiatives’ enactment of Facebook as a democratic actor is reinforced by the enlisting of users—along with independent third parties like fact-checkers—in aspects of content moderation, including in reporting ‘bad’ content, in ranking trustworthy sources and in responding to surveys on what they see as informative news (see summaries of initiatives seven and eleven in ‘Facebook’s Quality Initiatives’, above). This enlisting is promoted as democratically ‘empowering’ users (Zuckerberg 2017a; Zigmond 2018), which works to obscure Facebook’s ultimate power and systematic shaping of the form and visibility of its users’ communication towards maximizing ‘engagement’ and target advertising, and thus to obscure the platform’s negative impact on public sphere quality. Users are further positioned as empowered by initiatives offering them some, largely token, control over the content they see (e.g. more control over which ‘friends’ they do and do not wish to see posts from) and ‘allowing’ them to be their own judge of the value, including the veracity, of the information fed to them. Moreover, as seen in initiatives eight and nine, Facebook suggests that it is empowering users in such judgment by providing contextual information on news articles and by supporting ‘news literacy’. Facebook gives users (and other actors),⁸ according to Bickert (2018a), the ability to make responsible choices with respect to communication on the platform. Facebook’s various quality initiatives, asserts Facebook’s director of News Feed analytics Dan Zigmond (2018), work to ‘empower people to decide for themselves what to read, trust, and share’. This rhetoric promotes a liberal-individualist subject that simply needs to be informed and up-skilled so as to make rational decisions for themselves in relation to judging and contributing to Facebook’s communication. However, this liberal-individualist subject is not a deliberative and public-oriented subject able to advance democracy, and neither does this subject follow from, but rather conceals, the way in which users are actually constituted, as already noted, by the platform as Pavlovian (stimulus-response) subjects.

In these ways, the quality initiatives work to obscure the negative impact of Facebook’s targeted-advertising revenue model on the quality of public sphere communication and to protect Zuckerberg’s and shareholder interests

(in profit and growth) from user, journalist, developer, advertiser and legislator discontents and critiques, which would likely lead to actions—particularly user and advertiser withdrawal and regulations—that would negatively impact the maximization of profit and growth. Up until now, this obscuring has not been wholly successful, as indicated by the ongoing discontent with Facebook. But new quality initiatives continue to be rolled out, and with time they may succeed, in combination with Facebook's general public relations and political lobbying, to more fully conceal the political economy problem.

Considering Education's Role

Facebook has responded to discontents with the quality of online public sphere communication on its platform primarily by way of producing a stream of quality initiative announcements and implementations, as outlined in 'Facebook's Quality Initiatives,' above. These initiatives are likely to have some positive impact on Facebook communication vis-à-vis the constitution of public spheres, broadly conceived. However, the initiatives do not fundamentally challenge Facebook's targeted-advertising revenue model that has been shown, on the whole, to encourage low-quality public sphere communication. Rather, the initiatives generally work in unison with the revenue model: the initiatives promise to largely cleanse the platform of many of the most easily identified anti-democratic forms of communication plaguing it, which are often also attention, 'engagement' and advertising undermining forms—for example, terror content, hate speech, foreign propaganda, spam, disinformation—while overlooking the massive amount of less obviously poor-quality public sphere communication that is advanced by the platform's engagement maximizing and targeted-advertising revenue model. This negative impact of the model on quality public sphere communication is obscured, rather than positively attended to, by the initiative's promise and performance of cleansing the communication. Through this obscuring, and other disappearing acts outlined in the previous section, Facebook's quality initiatives ideologically respond—in concert with Facebook's other public relations and political lobbying work—to the growing concerns and discontents with the platform's revenue model.

This brings us to the fourth and final question asked in the introduction: what should be done in education to address Facebook's (and other profit-driven targeted-advertising platforms') impoverishment of online public sphere communication, and what should be education's response to the ideological masking by Facebook's initiatives of this impoverishment? Any education-oriented 'solution' to Facebook's quality problems that does not critically address the impact of the platform's revenue model is not only insulting to users, but itself acts ideologically by masking such impact. By critically addressing, I mean no less than working towards the democratization of the platform by identifying, politicizing (contextualizing) and normatively evaluating the values,

interests, logics and decisions behind the platform's technological affordances. The democratization of Facebook would be most fully achieved by turning it into a non-profit, democratically owned and thus controlled entity (such as a public service social media). However, taking social democratic ownership of the platform is highly unlikely in the current political climate. More feasible democratization moves, while still politically difficult to accomplish, include a combination of: breaking up the company; regulating to make it accountable to citizens; instituting data transferability and interoperability rules that ensure that users can easily shift to democratic platforms; and financially assisting the development of such democratic platforms, as well as investigative journalism by applying a rentier tax to Facebook and other for-profit platforms, given that they profit from content that they do not produce or pay for. I cannot explore these and other democratizing options here.⁹ I will focus instead on what role 'digital literacy' and education in general can have in relation to such democratization.

In relation to the democratization of digital social media, education needs to, first and foremost, enable student learning about, and interrogation of, the political economy and associated ideological work of the platforms, and how this relates to the political economy and ideology of technology and societies more generally. Education is conceived here as public sphere constituting,¹⁰ providing space for the interrogation and debate of social problems, including that of Facebook's and other social media corporations' democratic deficits. While this 'critical' social media education is desperately needed in terms of helping to advance the public sphere and democracy through social media, it is also what Facebook and other profit-maximizing social media corporations will be trying to ensure that people do not get, or even know that is needed. As we have seen, Facebook acts to conceal such systemically focused digital literacy by framing and promoting digital literacy as being about informing and giving tools to individual users to enable them to make good 'choices'. Informing here is understood by Facebook to be enabled through the wealth of voices that the platform networks, and in terms of the quality initiatives, facilitated by the provision of contextual information on news. And the tools provided by Facebook for the making of 'choices' include those that enable individual users to change settings so that they can (somewhat) modify their visibility of, and to, other users (Facebook does not, needless to say, refer to the visibility and subsequent informing that itself, its clients and its developers gain through surveillance of nearly everything users do on the platform, and even beyond it).

The liberal-individualist (rational choosing individual) and largely privatized (self-interested) subject articulated in this framing of digital literacy—which many actors beside Facebook promote—obscures not only Facebook and similar platforms' actual systemic constitution of users as Pavlovian (stimulus-response) subjects, as noted in the previous section, but also the need for, and possibility of, critical and democracy-enhancing social media literacy. Critical education must expose this ideological work, while at the same time acknowledging the

dialectical potentiality for democracy of the proliferation of voices and the distribution of information on Facebook's and other corporate platforms.

In thinking about critical social media education with respect to discontents and concerns about Facebook's relationship to public sphere norms, I have specifically focused on the impact of the platform's political economy and associated ideology. But a general conception of critical digital education is not reducible to political economy and ideology critique. Critical digital education includes any approach that involves not only describing but also politicizing and normatively judging technological systems and their values, interests, meanings, logics, affordances, applications, user interpretations, uses and social impacts.¹¹ By politicizing, I mean illuminating the social and historical contextuality and thus contingency of social phenomena, and hence de-naturalizing—showing how they are based on power relations and political decisions, and that they *could* be otherwise. By normatively judging, I mean applying politically founded (and thus always revisable) norms such as the public sphere conception to evaluate social phenomena and highlight how they *should* be otherwise. Hence, critical social media education should include, for example, Internet history, which is essential for contextualization. Also useful is critical platform studies, which highlights and interrogates not only the technological logics and architecture shaping use, but also the political decisions and values embedded within these logics and architectures. In addition, political and ethical studies are needed for fostering normative judgment capabilities. And critical ethnography, psychology and sociology are also useful for students in exploring and interrogating users' social media interpretations, desires and drives, attachments and adaptations (of themselves and of the technology), and in helping to think how users might actively and collectively resist their subjectification.

Central here is shifting the focus of the role of digital education from being about supporting individual choices and interests to fostering critical thinking and debating subjects who can see and engage with their world and technology not as given, but as socially shaped, and thus as being open to being shaped otherwise. In other words, I'm calling here on a vision where digital education is seen as providing the foundations for students not only to participate in contextual and normative investigations of digital platforms, but also, more broadly, to help constitute public debates, and subsequently public opinions that can feed into democratic activism and politics, around social media's role with respect to shaping communication, subjects, politics and society at large.

Notes

¹ In support of its public relations campaign, Facebook also increased its political lobbying efforts (Frenkel et al. 2018).

² Facebook's Community Standards spell out what content and interaction is, and is not, allowed on the platform, including public sphere undermining

hate speech, bullying, harassment and the promotion of offline violence (Bickert 2018b). See, as at February 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/>

- ³ Facebook is able to quickly ramp up the number of its reviewers without major impact on profits given that many of them are outsourced contract workers, often employed in cheap labour markets, including the Philippines and India (Gillespie 2018).
- ⁴ See Facebook Help Centre at <https://www.facebook.com/help/188118808357379>
- ⁵ Updates of all Facebook Journalism Project's sub-initiatives can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/solutions/facebook-journalism-project>
- ⁶ Snopes withdrew from its fact-checking work for Facebook at the end of 2018 after expressing frustration with the platform's expectations, particularly around the lack of support Facebook was providing for this work (Funke 2019a).
- ⁷ Emotions are essential to public sphere communication, but not emotional reaction bereft of reasoned reflection.
- ⁸ Bickert (2018a), for example, stated, when representing Facebook before a British parliamentary hearing into 'fake news', that 'we are trying to improve the ability of the broader community, meaning not just users but journalists, policymakers, educators, parents, to fight false news by recognizing it, distinguishing among news sources, and being able to make responsible choices.'
- ⁹ For more on democratizing Facebook, see Fuchs (2014), Pickard (2017; 2018) and Tarnoff (2019), and for activism in this direction, see the Freedom from Facebook initiative at <https://freedomfromfb.com/>
- ¹⁰ While education should be considered as public sphere constituting, the public sphere and its media systems can be conceived as fostering critical learning and the constitution (education) of publicly oriented democratic subjects.
- ¹¹ For further on the type of critical analysis that I envisage, see Glynos & Howarth (2007).

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