

Social Media and Hypervigilance: A Survey

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Abstract

Media, and specifically, social media, is playing an increasingly central role within American political discourse. This poster will attempt to explain the reasoning behind why social media is taking up so much space in our discourse and what that means for American democracy. In attempting to answer these questions, this poster will rely utilize the works *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* and *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* by Jonathan Crary and James Bridle respectively. In addition to that fact, this poster will pay attention to the central point of Bridle's book- technology is not a neutral force and should not be framed as one

Hyperobjects

First, I would like to introduce a term, used by Bridle to describe both climate change, and our newly connected world. A hyperobject is described as "a thing that surrounds us, envelops and entangles us, but that is literally too big to see in its entirety" (91). Our current state, in terms of technology and influence, is contained within this hyperobject. We are only able to see the direct influence the internet and social media has on us, but we are unable to see the multitude of extant forces that are working upon us.

How does data influence us?

As it is impossible to view the system as a whole, we must view certain processes with clarity and detail. I would like to start with formulating an understanding of the algorithms used by major social media companies to tailor content for consumption. At its core, social media requires consumption to be profitable. This means that the content recommended to its users will generally be acceptable to said users cultural, social, and political preferences. Intrinsicly, this fact pushes back against the notion that social media exposes people to a variety of opinions. When in fact, the app is designed to show you exactly what you want to see. There is also the added element of what algorithms prioritize what kind of political ideology. Conservatives often lament that they are dealt an unfavorable hand in social media's environment, but this untrue. In actuality, conservatives are offered a greater spotlight, and two social media sites, Facebook and Tik Tok, have been observed to push users towards creators that manufacture far-right wing content (Binder). On Facebook, it has been shown that the site auto-generated far-right pages simply because users named them as employers (De Chant). These sites have not been removed, even after being discovered, and nor are they innocuous, as the prominent ones that remain have thousands of likes. Data influences us, and not in ways we are aware of.

The Problems of Artificiality and Insincerity

The discussion of artificial users has been a constant one since the discovery that bots were deployed in the 2016 United States presidential elections. Unfortunately, this revelation has changed little in the ways social media sites moderates such fabricated activity. In fact, a recent whistleblower at Facebook has reported that they recently removed nearly 11 million fake reactions to a number of running politicians in the 2018 U.S. midterms, and that this constituted only a small effort in the overall problem of artificial inflation (Silverman et al). This creates another problem for the veracity of social media as a gateway for information and diversity. People are being unduly influenced by a small number of bad actors, and this influence lowers the general level of knowledge within social media's ecosphere. Once again, falsity and blindness rule the sites we are often deeply attenuated to.

'Time without a time': Social media's trap

Jonathan Crary argues that we live in a 24/7 world, one dominated by machinic processes that keeps us ever engaged within a faceless and commodified world. It is hard not to see this fact reflected presently in social media, and there are numerous facets of social media that contribute to keeping you engaged and on social media's timeline. For example, the popular app Tik Tok provides a constant stream of short clips, and in doing that, the app does not show the time while in the app. It is a constant refrain from people who use the app that they simply are unaware of time passing, in part because of the addictive nature of short videos and the lack of temporal reference. Naturally, advertisements are played every few videos. Instagram keeps users trapped as well, notably with its use of the story feature, which auto-deletes after 24 hours. This time frame begs for daily checking and updating, as one wants to stay connected to their social network.

Conclusions and Questions

Throughout this poster, I have tried to make the point understood that we do not live in a hospitable social media environment, and that in fact, everything about social media is designed to keep us ill-informed, but attentive. Profits are the goals of these companies, and they are profitable at the expense of our ability to understand our surroundings. Numerous people have explored why divisions are becoming more frequent and more severe, and I think it is time to understand social media as a driving force. Moreover, I want to make clear that the throughline of this poster is to clarify that social media is not a neutral system. As we move forward into our technological future, we have to recognize this fact, and begin thinking of new ways to moderate and control how social media influences politics.

Works Cited

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