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The Technological Questions Facing the Future of Humanity

This week's topic begins to look at the big picture behind everything we've discussed in this class so far. While surveillance for advertising purposes, government intrusion on digital communications, and the dangers to privacy posed by modern technologies are all important topics, each of these is but a drop in the ocean. In the Pocket article by Zeynep Tufekci, we begin to gain a glimpse at the greater ramifications of the constant march of technological progress unburdened by wisdom or temperance.

The internet was at one time celebrated as a grand technology that would enable and enhance global communication. I can still remember my trips to Disney World when I was young, and the inspiring and grandiose messaging I'd hear at EPCOT. The central ride at the part, Spaceship Earth, instilled in me a sense of wonder when it came to the future of communication, of the spread of information and ideas, and the connection it would bring between the various cultures of humanity. I think back to those days and I can still remember the chills of anticipation and excitement for the future I'd get from this messaging.

For a time, I thought I was witnessing those promises come to fruition as I watched cultural events sweep across the nation and seemingly empower the average citizen to have their voices heard. I didn't always agree with the messages that rose to the forefront of public

discourse, but I acknowledged the power then held by the people to elicit change. A small, singular voice could create a social media post and, seemingly by some luck or magic, that post could go viral, inspiring a sweeping change in positions held by the public, leading to shifts in culture that would last to this day.

But as is the case with any tool that has capabilities greater than anything that came before it, those with power fueled by self-serving agendas would figure out how to use these technological tools against the good of the people. The inner working of social media platforms would be dissected and, when combined with a Machiavellian application of social psychology, utilized to alter the natural course of culture and discourse. The same was done with modern online media outlets, often called "alternative media," which was viewed as the beginning of the downfall of "legacy media." These platforms were mimicked and used to sow division among the population by presenting conflicting perspectives designed to not only breed conflict, but to act as "proof" that the worst version of a political or ideological position's opposition did, in fact, exist, when really that opposition was crafted and nurtured into existence, on both sides of a divide, by this very mechanism.

Political campaigns were able to use the data gathered by these platforms to perform microtargeting, nudging those who would otherwise not have voted to vote, and thus influencing election results in their favor. Who knows to what extent governments are using this new propaganda engine to influence public opinion on local, national, and international stages to a degree never before possible.

When Schneier makes the claim that "Freedom also depends on the free circulation of ideas. Government censorship, often enabled by surveillance, stifles them both," I think he's making a statement that was always thought to be true, and at one time was true. However, given the way social media and the freedom of speech available on these platforms has enabled both our own and foreign governments to influence and manipulate our population, I'm not so sure this claim can be taken at face value anymore.

When a hostile foreign government can create fake news outlets and convince American citizens of absurdities, driving chunks of the population into conspiracy theorist rabbit holes so deep they may never climb back out of them, the need for some form of limitation or restriction becomes apparent. I do believe that freedom requires the free circulation of ideas, and that even the worst of ideas should be allowed their free expression because, as they say, sunlight is the best disinfectant. But I think this requires a population that takes more accountability for what they allow themselves to believe, and it seems we've become so lazy and lacking in critical thinking ability that this no longer applies as it once did.

Humanity is infinitely interesting in its quirks. The human brain seems to be wired for maximum efficiency, and from a certain perspective, this seems ideal. Why spend extra energy when it is not necessary and energy is a limited and hard to acquire resource? So, when the consumption of information without any consideration to what's being consumed or its implications is the most efficient choice, why would the human mind choose anything else? I think there's many variables that factor into this phenomenon, like the availability of food for example, and the way technology and the internet have reduced the amount of effort required to accomplish many tasks, among many others. But the fact is, people don't want to put any

effort into what they "know" anymore, and have displayed a tendency to latch onto the most emotionally triggering bits of news and information they come across, whether true or not.

This leads to the idea of information gatekeepers, an idea I would have scoffed at with disgust at one time. While I still believe such a role should be extremely limited with respect to upholding as much freedom as possible, I have come to feel that such a thing is necessary. However, the role of information gatekeeper is something that should be done with extreme caution and skepticism. If those fulfilling this role lacked in an ethical foundation, they could, for example, easily use this power to silence those in support of politicians that go against these gatekeepers' ideological positions. Or in the case of social media platforms like Facebook or X, as we've already seen happen in some of these companies, the allure of profits could tarnish the mission and enable decisions to be made in pursuit of profits rather than upholding truth.

If information gatekeepers were to be socially accepted and implemented, it would have to be done in a way that maximized protections and minimized the potential for abuse. Historically, the closest thing I can think of would be some sort of council made of individuals from all walks of life, culture, and politics. For this to be done in a way that avoids falling to the allure of personal gain, I think it would have to be a government entity, and I say that with disdain for the idea, honestly. I think we've learned enough to know that governments should not be trusted blindly, and I think perhaps a council that were government funded and facilitated, but publicly operated may be the ideal solution, structured with a great deal of checks and balances, redundancies, and perhaps with mechanisms for public input.

Something that comes to mind as I write this is an idea I've heard on a podcast many times. I won't go into what the podcast is or the topics it covers, as it has nothing to do with the topics in this class outside of some tangential culture war themes only related in the loosest of ways (though, perhaps it may serve as an example of the consequences of such things that this very paper is discussing). However, the idea goes that if one attended a county fair and were to ask a single person to guess the weight of a cow, that person would very likely be up to hundreds of pounds off the mark. But if one were to ask a thousand people to guess the weight of the cow, then averaged out the answers, the result would likely be very, very close to the actual weight of the cow.

The idea, as I've heard it referred to, is called the "Wisdom of the Crowd," and sounds very much like democracy, though I can see how in terms of application, it can take a different form. In the podcast, it was used to illustrate the perspective panelists should take when answering the question of how they would rate themselves in terms of physical attractiveness to avoid the typical "cope" answer of "well, I personally feel like I'm a 10" usually given by panelists who by no objective measurement qualified as a 10.

Aside from that slight tangent, I think the idea of the wisdom of the crowd would prove valuable to the concept of "information gatekeeper" and would help to prevent any one ideology from gaining too much control over the national narrative. The power of a gatekeeper cannot be placed exclusively in the hands of any individual or group that has something to gain from it without a substantial counterbalance that can negate abuse of the system.

However, regardless of whether a gatekeeper system like this were to be implemented, the ubiquitous surveillance we've all experienced must end. I've already discussed why this data collection is dangerous in previous papers, but to reiterate, when individuals or organizations outside of the person from whom the data is being gather know more about said person than they do themselves, this leads to all sorts of potential dangers. At a minimum, that data gives corporations and governments the power to subtly influence the individual away from the natural thoughts and decisions they would have otherwise, and towards whatever the greater agenda demands, directly controlling the person's free will without them ever realizing they've lost control of their own mind. At worst, we're looking at some horrific abuses of power only seen in totalitarian dictatorships and nations rules by religious extremists. Disappearances, re-education camps, mass killings, the list goes on.

To wrap things up, and admittedly falling short of giving this topic the attention it deserves, this dynamic being discussed between the powerful and the powerless, the rulers and the ruled, and how technology is altering it is a discussion that hits deeper than just contemporary events. This is a turning point in human history that will decide the fate of our species moving forward. Will technology empower freedom, innovation, and exploration of thought? Or will it subjugate the masses under a technocratic surveillance state? It's still too early to tell, but now is the time when the public needs to have an input into its own future. Hopefully these discussions continue being had in academia and in online conversations, otherwise the decision will be made for us, and the likelihood that decision would be to our benefit is slim to none.

Sources:

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