

Technological Dependence and the Degradation of Society

The modern world has become advanced beyond what our ancestors could have ever dreamed possible. The average person can contact anyone in the world at any time instantly, and their voice can reach hundreds of thousands, even millions of eyes with a single social media post. The entirety of human knowledge is available at one's fingertips from anywhere with just a few taps of a screen, and through that same screen, there is a functionally infinite amount of entertainment content available to access from any genre, in any medium, in any language, and at various levels of interactivity.

While in many ways, technology has allowed society to become more advanced than most people throughout history could ever have imagined, our dependence on it, and the recklessness in our use of it, has led to a society which has lost something of its humanity, imbuing a fragility to its foundations and allowing for the rapid spread of hedonic degeneracy, tribalism, authoritarian ideation, and cultural extremism stemming from widespread propagandistic falsehoods taken as truths by a populace who's perception of reality has become twisted and too uncomfortable to bear.

How did we get here, and through what mechanisms did the erosion of human progress occur? In the documentary *The Facebook Dilemma*, the directors attempt to answer this question, at least in part. In their presentation of the history of Facebook and its growth as both

a company and something resembling a social utility, they attempt to illustrate how an idea birthed and developed to “give people the power to share in order to make the world more open and connected” (Facebook’s own mission statement), grew to become an overwhelmingly and unexpectedly powerful force for cultural and societal change; a force ultimately misunderstood and misused by even its own creators.

The use of technology and social media has the potential to enhance social structures, enable communication of complex ideas across the world, facilitate a reduction in the effort required to survive and provide for oneself, and accelerate the progress of our species. However, their unrestricted and unregulated use leads to potentially catastrophic consequences due to the actions of irresponsible and malicious actors in governments, corporations, and the public space.

Facebook, for all the good it has done in connecting people and giving their voices reach, has consistently shown a disregard for the influence it has on world events and society. This disregard can be seen even in Facebook’s early days, where one of the company’s mottos was to “move fast and break things.” Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder of Facebook, once stated that he was motivated by “building things that change the world in a way that it needs to be changed” without considering whether he had the authority to decide how the world needed to be changed.

While being interviewed for the documentary, Tim Sparapani, Facebook’s director of public policy from 2009-2011, stated “Some of us had an early understanding that we were creating, in some ways, a digital nation state. This was the greatest experiment in free speech in

human history.” It certainly was an experiment, one performed irresponsibly by a group of “20-somethings” with an IV league mentality and lacking in diversity. There seemed to be a sense of entitlement among the group, believing themselves to be “building the future...” with “... a real focus on youth being a good thing” as stated by Sandy Parakilas, platform operations manager from 2011-2012. Facebook grew while being driven by idealists with an irresponsibility that would only manifest years later, and with monumental consequences.

During these early days, the company culture included a “mafioso code of silence” common in Silicon Valley at the time, where employees were not supposed to talk about the business in any but the most flattering ways; nothing measured or truthful. This meant the public had little knowledge of the goings on at the company, nor did they care. They had little reason to. Facebook was providing a service which allowed the public to communicate and share ideas in ways they had never experienced before.

As stated by author Bruce Schneier in his book *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World*, “The bargain you make, again and again, with various companies is surveillance in exchange for free service.” Every day, we are trading our personal, private information for conveniences we’ve convinced ourselves to be necessities. We freely give our data away, which provides governments and corporations the means to know everything about us better than we even know ourselves, making us readily identifiable even when using technologies to protect anonymity. In exchange, we can communicate instantly using social media, email, and SMS, know our location and the directions to our destination with GPS, and have access to the answers to any question we may have instantly through the internet.

We view these services as free because in most cases, and in a money-hungry world where the dollar opens the door to opportunity, we pay nothing for the use of these services. The use of a data plan may have a monthly cost, but the things we do with that data plan are rarely subscription-based. However, when we consider the value of the data collected by these services, and the wealth generated using that data by corporations and data brokers, none of these services are truly free. In fact, their cost is so valuable that corporations spend vast amounts of time and resources ensuring we never see the true value of our data or what can be gleaned from it.

So then, companies like Facebook were allowed free reign over the course of their growth and development without the public feeling concerned or governments exerting regulatory control. Eventually, Facebook grew to such a size that it either had to begin to generate revenue or it would cease to exist. The company decided it would go public and would do so marketing its most valuable asset: users' personal data.

Enter Sheryl Sandberg, who oversaw building Facebook's advertising business. Alongside Zuckerberg, she downplayed data collection and emphasized privacy, but internally she led Facebook in a direction driven by profit. Around four months before the IPO, Facebook announced partnerships with data brokers. These partnerships were lucrative for the company, as personal data had become big business. The surveillance made available by the platform's mechanics gave Facebook and their partnered data brokers access to where users lived and worked, how they spent their time, who they had relationships with, what their shopping habits were, and what they spent their resources on most, among many other data points.

This information is valuable to data brokers because it is even more valuable to corporations looking to profit from that information, as well as governments looking to exert power and control over their populations. Facebook became a prime source for this data, and as such, became a profit-driven company at its users' expense.

Over the years, Facebook became involved in social controversies related to its data collection policies, such as in Europe where privacy laws existed but were rarely enforced. Law student Max Schrems had a chance encounter with a Facebook attorney and was led down the path to discovering how much of his data had been collected, around 1,200 pages worth. He filed 22 complaints with the Data Protection Commission in Ireland, which while getting Schrems no answers, eventually led to stricter privacy laws in the EU and much better enforcement.

During the 2016 election, Facebook's advertising tools became the target by malicious foreign actors seeking to use those tools to influence the US election, primarily from Russia. These bad actors were based at the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg. Facebook knew of the potential Russian disinformation campaigns as early as 2014, but held no internal investigations, and when questioned, stated essentially that they were an open platform, a free-speech platform, and a pro-democracy platform. Facebook HQ stuck with their mission and business model of collecting and selling user data, regardless of how and by whom its monetization mechanics were used.

In 2016, 39% of the US population got their election news and decision-making material from Facebook, and 62% got their general news from social media platforms. This meant Facebook had become a prime target for social, cultural, and political manipulation by malicious

foreign actors. Russian agents would use the platform's tools to create opposing groups to attract and identify those who were susceptible to propagandist tactics. This method was used to sow division in American society and promote the tribalism we see rampant today. Facebook relied on polarization for its algorithms and business model, which meant the activities of foreign agents only fueled the engagement of its users, growing its profit at the expense of social cohesion.

Misinformation spread like wildfire, causing the population to question what was true and what was not. Social media news and the legacy new outlets seemed at odds with each other, causing truth to be difficult to discern and tribalism to become the cultural mode of operation. Over time, this lack of social cohesion and inability to discern fact from fiction led to a breakdown in online culture, leaking into the real world, and eroding at the foundations of what is perceived to be real.

As of 2018, Facebook still believed itself to be a force for good. The response from practically all employees interviewed for the documentary was that the company was "too slow to act." Tessa Lyons, chief of staff to Sheryl Sandberg, stated "I came into this job asking myself 'How long is it going to take us to solve this?' and the answer is this isn't a problem that you solve. It's a problem that you contain." Tessa implies that the company does not view misinformation as a problem they need to solve at all, as it simply cannot be solved.

When asked what standard the public should hold Facebook to, Naomi Gleit, Facebook's 2nd longest serving employee, answered "Amplifying the good and minimizing the bad. Be transparent with what we're doing on both sides, and you know, I think this is an ongoing

discussion.” The interviewer then asked, “What’s an ongoing discussion?” and she responded “How we’re doing on minimizing the bad.” She continues, paraphrased, that the ongoing discussion is them, herself, Sheryl, Mark, and other company leaders going out and speaking publicly about it. In other words, the ongoing discussion is a PR campaign.

Facebook has been the example as to why social media and tech companies being given free reign to do as they like without regulatory controls is leading to the erosion of culture and, through addiction-like dependence on their products, leads to the degradation of society. As of the filming of *The Facebook Dilemma*, Mark Zuckerberg still viewed Facebook not as part of the problem, but as the solution to the problem. It would seem even the founder of a tech company is not immune to dependence on its products.