

How Facebook Deforms Us

L. M. Sacasas

It was late in 2006 that I was first encouraged to join Facebook. A friend who had recently graduated from college eagerly reported that it was an amazing way to keep up with friends. I demurred at the time, but by next year I had capitulated. My relationship to Facebook then took on the quality of a bad high school romance: on again, off again. It became a steadier relationship when I became the *de facto* administrator for my employer's Facebook page. From that point forward, I maintained a consistent presence on the platform. Along the way I continually fiddled with my Friends list, tinkered with privacy settings, flirted with Google+ on the side, started a Facebook page for my blog, and experimented with different strategies to engage with political and religious issues.

Since the fateful fall of 2016, I have mostly withdrawn from the platform. I deleted the page for my blog. I began deleting my old posts. I stopped wishing friends a happy birthday. Currently, I use the platform almost entirely for self-promotion among a small number of Friends, who include chiefly family and friends. In the last couple of years, even that level of involvement has come to feel like a moral compromise. Why not delete my account altogether, then? A fair question. It's difficult, I suppose, to cut that last tenuous thread that binds me to my weak ties, a handful of childhood friends, former colleagues, and distant relatives.

I suspect my story is far from unique. Facebook itself presented us with the status option that may most adequately define our relationship to the platform: it's complicated. That also seems to be the case for Siva Vaidhyanathan, a professor of media studies and the director of the Center for Media and Citizenship at the University of Virginia, and the author of *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. The book is unsparingly critical of Facebook, and rightly so. It also offers serious and compelling suggestions for how to move forward. But these two aspects of *Antisocial Media* generate an intriguing tension throughout the work: As far as Vaidhyanathan is correct in his critique, his program for reform will likely fail.

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Facebook as Vice

Vaidhyanathan's work has many virtues, not the least of which is its timeliness. The publishing process is slow, and the world of digital media does not let up. But the dates of articles cited in the book show that Vaidhyanathan was working on revisions up to the last possible moment. It is not an easy thing to write a book about digital technology that does not feel outdated as soon as it is released, but Vaidhyanathan has gotten as close as can be hoped. Of course, the timeliness is also by design: In April, amidst a firestorm of controversy surrounding CEO Mark Zuckerberg's testimony to Congress on his company's role in the 2016 presidential election, Oxford University Press moved up the book's publication date from its original fall release, with the book shipping just five weeks later.

Vaidhyanathan's previous scholarly work tackled the thorny topic of copyright in the early years of the Internet era, and made him among the first to cast a skeptical eye on the social consequences of Google's search dominance. He was also, early in his scholarly career, a close colleague of the late Neil Postman, one of our most prophetic and astute scholars of media and technology. We should thus not be surprised that *Antisocial Media* is a deeply informed and accessible work. The book offers clear, deeply researched, and evenhanded prose, enhanced by the author's willingness to speak candidly about his own experience as a Facebook user, and reflecting the author's admirable commitment to addressing his readers principally as fellow citizens.

The title of the introduction—"The Problem with Facebook Is Facebook"—gets right to the heart of the matter, and is one of the lines most frequently cited in discussions of the book. The platform "cannot be reformed at the edges," Vaidhyanathan goes on to say. "Basically, there are two things wrong with Facebook: how it works and how people use it"—which is to say, of course, that Facebook is all wrong. In these opening pages we also read that "Facebook is feeding our worst appetites while starving the institutions that could strengthen us" and that "Facebook undermines our ability to think collectively about our problems."

Vaidhyanathan is undoubtedly correct in these judgments, each of which he goes on to substantiate throughout the book in well-researched detail.

It's thus surprising to discover that, despite his unsparing critique, Vaidhyanathan is nonetheless committed to remaining a Facebook user. Although he affirms that Facebook has been "bad for all of us collectively," he also believes it "likely has been—on balance—good for individuals." You must know this to be true, he continues, because "if, on balance, the positive effects of Facebook did not outweigh the negative effects, you likely would have quit it by now." This conclusion seems at best debatable when, as Vaidhyanathan himself shows, Facebook's engineers, like the creators of casinos and snack food, specifically designed it to be addictive. But ultimately, Vaidhyanathan wants us not to abstain but to "harness Facebook so it serves us better and harms us less." In order to do so,

we must turn to regulation around the world. To learn to live better with Facebook, we must understand the ideologies and histories of technology. We must sharpen our critical tools so that we have better conversations about Facebook and the other inventions that seem to offer us so much for so little, but ultimately take much more than they give. We must stop and think.

All of this might sound like a reasonable program for action had we not read, three pages earlier, that "calls for 'media literacy'" are futile and that "there are few regulatory interventions beyond better privacy protections that would make a significant difference to how Facebook operates." These two sets of claims may not ultimately be, strictly speaking, contradictory, but they do suggest a strange incongruity that manifests at various points throughout the book. It's particularly evident at the end of the introduction, where Vaidhyanathan offers the following "confession": "I have lived my life through Facebook. Facebook has been the operating system of my life." This admission, and the underlying reality, are part of what lend *Antisocial Media* its rhetorical force. Alongside the work's evident *logos*, it also injects *ethos* and *pathos*, generating a palpable tension.

It is this tension—which there is no indication that Vaidhyanathan experiences as such—that points us toward the full meaning of his work. To be clear, this is not to suggest that Vaidhyanathan is contradicting himself or being hypocritical. Rather, we ought to press this tension in order to more fully disclose to ourselves the nature of our situation.

Vaidhyanathan recognizes that there are no easy or straightforward solutions to the problems he catalogs, certainly not in the short run. His noble hope is that, over the long run, we will strengthen the institutions

that can sustain “a healthy social and political life,” and will reinforce the work of these institutions with robust norms that will better order our relationship to Facebook. The institutions Vaidhyanathan names include libraries, schools, universities, and unspecified civil society organizations. The norms he has in mind are rules that govern behavior and adjudicate conflicts. He sometimes calls them democratic norms or republican norms (small-d, small-r). They are the moral and epistemic guardrails that keep a democratic society functioning. “Norm-building is so much harder than technology development,” Vaidhyanathan acknowledges. “But it’s the only effective response we have to the problems we have invited.”

Vaidhyanathan is not wrong about the need for both renewed institutions and revived norms. But Facebook will undermine those efforts at every turn—and not only Facebook. As Vaidhyanathan acknowledges at various points throughout *Antisocial Media*, Facebook is just one important component of an immensely complex set of mutually reinforcing social, political, and technological trends. And the norms and institutions we need in order to put Facebook “in its proper place” will never materialize because of the actual place Facebook, and digital technology more broadly, already occupies in our society. We are thus stuck in a vicious cycle.

Pleasure and Purpose

Antisocial Media explores Facebook’s social consequences by circling the platform and considering it from a variety of perspectives, each revealing an important aspect of the whole. The first perspective is on Facebook as a site of pleasure, a sound place to begin. This chapter explores why we may find it so difficult to go without Facebook. “Despite all the problems it facilitates and all the hatred it amplifies,” Vaidhyanathan writes, “Facebook is valuable.” Facebook connects us with friends, introduces us to important causes, and provides entertainment. So we pay attention. “We don’t do that for frivolous reasons,” he tells us—we don’t *merely* do that for frivolous reasons, one might have better written.

Immediately, however, he also reminds us that “Facebook manipulates us.” Borrowing from Natasha Dow Schull’s exploration of casino design in her 2012 book *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*, he details how Facebook is consciously and meticulously designed to generate compulsive engagement. He pays particularly close attention to the key role played by the proliferation of both images and identity performance. The net effect of these design decisions, he soundly observes, is a drift toward tribalism that undercuts civic responsibility.

We see already a tension that will develop throughout the book. On the one hand, Vaidhyanathan tells us, the problem with Facebook is Facebook. So, we might think, the platform cannot escape being the thing that it is. Yet he also seems to believe that users can become the sort of people who will remain stoically uncorrupted by their use of Facebook. At times, he even seems to believe that there is some version of Facebook, tamed by appropriate regulation and taken up by these more virtuous users, that can become a safe and inconsequential vehicle for sharing baby and puppy pictures. This tension seems to arise from an attempt to offer a tangible suggestion about how to move forward. It is, after all, unreasonable to expect that Facebook will simply go away. But this tension also leaves muddled the questions of what Facebook is, who we are when we log on to it, and whether we should actually expect either to be capable of becoming something else.

At the end of the first chapter, there is an instructive discussion about what Aristotle could have taught Mark Zuckerberg. There is surely a great deal Zuckerberg could learn from the ancient philosopher, and many of the points Vaidhyanathan offers from Aristotle about the true nature of friendship, and the political nature of human beings, are well taken.

In places, though, one wishes for a richer engagement. For example, Vaidhyanathan claims that Zuckerberg's understanding of how Facebook has changed the world "commits the same fallacy that Aristotle did when examining the natural world." That fallacy is teleology, "the explanation of things based on what they are intended to do, not what they actually do. Zuckerberg assumes that Facebook performs a certain type of work in the world because he intended it to do that work." The lesson Vaidhyanathan draws for Zuckerberg is this: No matter what he intends for his platform, what really matters is how people actually use it, and people will use it for nefarious as well as benevolent purposes.

Vaidhyanathan here invokes a common but plain misunderstanding of Aristotle to offer a truism—that the consequences of technologies are often different than their creators' intentions—that could just as well have been made on its own, yet could also have been enriched after all by engaging with what Aristotle really said about how things work. That the bad behavior of Facebook's users is an important part of the larger picture is true enough, but it too is only part of the picture.

Aristotle's teleology is part of his broader doctrine of the four causes, which he offers as a way of explaining the nature of a thing or an organism. Expanding on one of Aristotle's own examples, we can look at the case of a bronze statue. Bronze is the material cause of the statue,

that out of which it was made. The formal cause of the statue is the form into which the raw bronze is shaped, or, we might say, the statue's design. The efficient cause of the statue, that which brings it into being, is the sculptor and his sculpting actions. The final cause, or *telos*, addresses the question of purpose, or what something is *for*—in this case, perhaps to commemorate a political leader. Or, to offer another example of a final cause, Aristotle says that surgical instruments are for the sake of health.

When Vaidhyanathan claims that Aristotle was mistaken in giving a teleological explanation of things, he has in mind Aristotle's application of final causes to nature: "Aristotle explains the function and structure of plants and animals by their ends (*telos*), or what they are meant to do." To Vaidhyanathan, it's as if Aristotle thinks the function of a tree is no different from the function of a table—both are given by someone's or something's intention. But this is not right. Like things, organisms have something "for the sake of which" they become what they become. For Aristotle, the final purpose of a tree is not its intention or desire, or that of an outside agent; it is simply that which the tree in its earliest form will eventually become. The final cause of the acorn is the full-grown oak. Purpose in this sense is simply a way of speaking about that toward which something regularly tends.

From this fuller view of Aristotle's causality we might suggest a richer view of Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg's intentions for Facebook are certainly part of how we ought to grasp the nature of the platform, but Vaidhyanathan is right that they don't get us very far. The same is true, however, about the users' intentions. When we use Facebook, our intentions are constrained, channeled, and impelled by the structure and the digital material of the platform, its formal and material causes.

Further, although Facebook is an artifact rather than a living thing, it is a peculiar kind of artifact: Unlike a bronze statue, it is a dynamic thing that is continually changing, that in a sense grows and evolves. It has an end toward which it is tending. This end may not be clearly given, as a bronze statue's is, or set in the way of a truly living thing, but it is nonetheless intertwined with the platform's material, formal, and efficient causes, which are bringing it about.

Facebook's movement toward its end is partially the consequence of the ongoing work of its designers and engineers, but it also plays out within the parameters of a particular trajectory from which the platform cannot altogether deviate. To some degree independently of the intentions of either Mark Zuckerberg or any of its two billion users, Facebook will be the sort of thing that Facebook has been becoming.

The Moral Formation Machine

Each chapter of *Antisocial Media* frames Facebook as a machine: “The Pleasure Machine,” “The Attention Machine,” “The Politics Machine,” “The Disinformation Machine,” and so on. The final point that we might draw from Aristotle, which the book implies but does not spell out, is that Facebook is also a moral formation machine. One answer to the question “What is Facebook for?” is that it is for the formation of a particular kind of human being. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* even helps us to understand how this process unfolds: Repeated action becomes habit, habit becomes inclination, inclination becomes virtue or vice, and these virtues and vices define our character. The habits generated by our use of Facebook shape our character. While we consciously or half-consciously perform our aspirational identity, as an inevitable consequence of Facebook’s formal and material qualities our identity is being shaped in a more profound though often unnoticed manner. There is no opting out of this dynamic.

If reading with and against the grain of Vaidhyathan’s discussion of Facebook as a pleasure machine accents the formative powers of media technology, his discussion of surveillance draws our attention to the moral and cultural vacuum in which Facebook’s consequences unfold. In combination with ubiquitous recording devices that we each carry around with us at all times, Vaidhyathan explains how Facebook has enabled and encouraged three distinct but related modes of surveillance: peer surveillance, corporate surveillance, and state surveillance. He is correct to note that our understanding of privacy is wholly inadequate to the challenges raised by digital tools of surveillance. He also correctly observes that Facebook’s own framing of privacy, as an engineering problem or a matter of consumer choice, does not help the situation. Indeed, it fosters an inability to conceive of privacy as a social, political, and, above all, moral reality. The hollowing out of our lived understanding of privacy was underway long before Facebook arrived on the scene, and Vaidhyathan helpfully points to existing American legal traditions that have contributed to our shallow understanding.

But I return to the question of moral formation. How is it that we became the sort of people who cared so little about privacy? Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and other media ecologists had their own ideas about the matter, often linking the evolution of our understanding of privacy to the rise and fall of print as the dominant medium of communication.

But it is also the case that embracing Facebook, and social media more broadly, has accustomed us to expect and crave a certain degree of

publicness. The social and moral context that undergirded a fuller and more robust understanding of privacy is gone. It is important to understand that very few people have ever been able to articulate a detailed and well-constructed theory of privacy. One did not have to; it was part of the social fabric, a tacit moral sense. It was, in other words, a matter of norms and institutions.

That fabric has been torn to shreds, in no small measure owing to the capabilities that electronic and digital media have created. As I understand him, Vaidhyanathan wants a renewal of these norms guarding not only how we handle our own privacy but also how we handle the frightening power each of us now has to compromise the privacy of others. Yet so long as we are the sort of people shaped by the practices that characterize social media, we are unlikely to experience such a renewal. We lack the moral infrastructure to sustain such a project.

Could It Be Otherwise?

One of the most enjoyable features of *Antisocial Media* is Vaidhyanathan's vignettes about his friendship with Neil Postman. He is clearly fond of Postman, and he gives Postman a great deal of credit for shaping how he has come to think about technology. "Neil inspired my lines of questioning and broadened my vision," Vaidhyanathan writes. "But he did not convert me to the faith." The faith in question is an "orthodox" media ecology in the vein of Marshall McLuhan. The chief problem with this school of thought, in Vaidhyanathan's view, is its technological determinism: "The technologies come first; the mental and social features come from the technologies. It's a strong, simple line of causation."

I am, admittedly, inclined toward an orthodox variety of media ecology, although I don't expect to succeed where Postman failed. I simply note that the charge of technological determinism requires a much longer discussion. It was McLuhan, after all, who affirmed, "There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening." And it is, of course, important to take economic and political factors into consideration when one contemplates what is happening.

But by whatever combination of factors, Facebook has, for now, achieved an unprecedented level of influence in societies across the globe, as Vaidhyanathan documents so well. Could it have been otherwise? Certainly. But that is irrelevant. If we live our lives through Facebook, our lives will be shaped by Facebook. If Facebook mediates our public discourse, then that discourse will be shaped by the formal properties of

the platform. The critical point to register is that we will be worked over by the medium, as McLuhan has put it. We will conform to its image. And this will happen regardless of how judiciously and responsibly we post.

Although Vaidhyanathan was not converted to the faith by Postman, he writes very nearly like a full convert in the concluding chapter of *Antisocial Media*, where he deploys Postman's 1992 book *Technopoly* to describe our cultural surrender to an ideology of technology. It was in *Technopoly* that Postman wrote,

Surrounding every technology are institutions whose organization—not to mention their reason for being—reflects the world-view promoted by the technology. Therefore, when an old technology is assaulted by a new one, institutions are threatened. When institutions are threatened, a culture finds itself in crisis.

This is as apt a characterization of our situation as we are likely to find. Curiously, Vaidhyanathan speaks of the need for “reinvestment in institutions that promote deep thought conducted at analog speed.” But this is the point at which Postman and McLuhan might help us to see more clearly than Vaidhyanathan. We want desperately to believe that the old institutions can be reinvigorated, renewed, revived. But the age of analog speed, barring some great catastrophe, is behind us, whether we like it or not. Facebook is just one of the facets of the emerging digital order that is assaulting the very institutions Vaidhyanathan wants to reinvigorate, tearing up the ground they require to survive, and undermining the cultivation of traditional citizenly virtues.

Quitting

At one point in *Antisocial Media*, Vaidhyanathan, channeling Postman, makes the following legitimate complaint: “It’s hard to participate in a republic, let alone face global challenges, when hit network programs such as *The Voice* have our eyes darting from television to iPad to phone, tweeting and cheering and chatting and shopping along.” Channeling *Seinfeld*, he immediately adds, “Not that there is anything wrong with that.” He goes on to say that the problem is the “unrelenting ubiquity of these draws on our attention.” I suspect, however, that Vaidhyanathan was too quick to diffuse the moral outrage. At some point, it seems to me, we must examine our practices and count the moral costs.

Vaidhyanathan is adamant about his refusal to abandon the platform. Discussing media theorist Douglas Rushkoff's 2013 opinion piece

explaining his decision to quit Facebook, Vaidhyanathan argues that such decisions make no difference at all to Facebook. “I’m still a Facebook user,” he adds. “And I have no plans to resign.” There is, he concedes, little to be done about Facebook’s influence except for the slow, deliberate work, to which he returns throughout the book, of renewing norms and rebuilding institutions. As I have suggested, renewal and rebuilding may not be the best way of framing the work, undoubtedly slow and deliberate, that must now be undertaken. Perhaps it is more like the work of reimagining than renewal. We cannot return to what is passing away, but we can work toward what has not yet come into being. And I cannot help but think that the cause could only be helped if more of us were willing to walk away from Facebook.

In *Living into Focus* (2012), Arthur Boers writes that he once heard the Amish farmer and writer David Kline tell a story about a bus full of Protestant tourists visiting Amish country. An Amish man is also on the bus, and so the tourists ask him about how his people are different from other Christians. The man first mentions some obvious similarities, such as wearing clothes and liking good food.

Then the Amish man asks: “How many of you have a television?”

All passengers raise their hands.

“How many of you believe your children would be better off without TV?”

Most, if not all, passengers raise their hands.

“How many of you, knowing this, will get rid of your television when you go home?”

No hands are raised.

“That’s the difference between the Amish and others,” he concluded.

The difference, in other words, is that the Amish maintained their robust deliberative institutions and norms precisely because they have been willing to pay the price of subjecting their use of technology to the greater good of sustaining the health of their community. The rest of us have inverted the priority, and we have paid our own price.