

Marcus Gilroy-Ware

**FILLING THE
VOID**

Emotion, Capitalism
& Social Media

Repeater



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Identifying the politics of content

Two consequences of filling the void

When we look at the picture created by Chapters One to Four of this book, we see that it is a worrying one overall. At this point, it may be helpful to summarise the arguments presented so far, in order to see this picture clearly.

Despite the fact that social media affect us in a variety of ways that are not good for us, we can't seem to resist using them. The story of the web's arrival into our lives is one that has generally encouraged a positivistic, nouveau-enlightenment, practically-oriented view of, at best, what new capabilities it provides us, and at worst, what the new technologies *make* us do. But the failure of control some of us exhibit in relation to social media reveals a different relationship with these technologies entirely, one that is often habitual and compulsive. The word "addiction" is even thrown around.

The emphasis of the debate about social media has largely been about identity and the self, what we post in that context, and why, but this picture shows us that in the end this may have been an incomplete analysis. It is a common misconception to understand technology as something that acts on and shapes us, but it is important that we instead see both social networks themselves and our use of them as being produced *by* culture. More specifically, and regardless of where

they are actually used, social networks are the product of first-world late-capitalist culture, which is increasingly pervaded by an economic logic. Examining the nature of our strangely compulsive relationship with social media has therefore required that this culture be unpicked. In doing so, two interlocking aspects of this culture are revealed as being particularly important:

Firstly, it is a culture that promotes *consumption*. Nearly everything is a consumable commodity, including media and culture themselves, which have become commodified into “content.” Social networks, in fact, must be understood above all as a reconfiguration of the web into a form that makes commodified media consumption as easy and as appealing as possible. But it is not enough to say that we are simply consuming media which have been commodified; this consumption is driven by some very interesting and specific processes that connect with the experience of life in a consumer society in general. Whether the content of the media is kittens, pictures of food, or highly subjective, opinion-based articles, the common thread in most timeline-based social media is that they provide an emotionally arousing experience that helps us to momentarily feel happy, sad, angry, proud, nostalgic, curious, etc. The specific nature or content of the media they encounter is only important to users of timeline media in so far as they are consuming a subjective emotional experience that provides much-needed distraction from the emotional reality in which they would otherwise find themselves, by way of a blast of affective stimulation.

Secondly, “first-world” late-capitalist culture places considerable stress on its participants. The idea that the so-called “first world” is happy while the “third world” suffers and struggles to survive, mocked with the idea of “first-world problems,” is also superficial and highly simplistic. Different forms of suffering are produced in the developed and developing worlds, and for different proportions of those populations, but in general they are produced by the same capitalist system. While there is stark material inequality between

developed and developing worlds and the struggle for basic survival faced by nearly half of the world's population requires drastic change, the developed world, and especially the Anglophone portions of it, is experiencing a mental-health crisis of enormous proportions. Even well before the point of identifiable mental illness, the need for an alternative way to feel, addressed so effectively by the social media timeline, is driven by the fact that many of us do not feel great about our lives, the world, or the future. We are measured, compared, blamed for our own problems, and pressured to compete according to terms on which we cannot "win," all while our sense of a bright future and a clear path towards it is taken away by political, economic, and even ecological factors beyond our control. What results is a feeling of emptiness, uncertainty, stagnation, and fear that can only ever be blocked out or escaped from by participating in various forms of enjoyment and consumption, which the corporations of the developed world are only too happy to provide. Capitalism has become established as a culture to which there is no alternative, and from which there is no escape, except subjectively and momentarily via consumption. Social media, as businesses themselves that feed on our need to be distracted from this system, are the most faithful manifestation of this system of all.

Thus social media use is primarily a pattern of compensatory media consumption that is both produced by broader patterns of capitalist life, and increasingly exploited by specific businesses such as Facebook Inc. While our usage is not beneficial to us in the long term at all, our affect-driven use of it for fleeting, compensatory reasons is of extreme commercial value to companies that are essentially exploiting the way that life within capitalist realism makes us feel. Social media corporations, and Facebook especially, have made gigantic and lucrative businesses based on positioning themselves between users and aspects of users' lives that in their original form might have provided some antidote to their unhappiness, such as friends, comforting food, relationships, events such as birthdays

and holidays, novelty, and entertainment. Such architectures allow the capture of data about exactly what is meaningful and important to each user, which both provides a saleable commodity in the form of marketing data, and allows social networks to make themselves increasingly indispensable in the day-to-day emotional life of the user and to pass on the commercial value of this proximity to their advertisers. As we scroll through the timeline, desperate to be distracted and emotionally stimulated, we are almost trapped in a virtual hamster wheel of media consumption and data generation. Our reliance on emotionally distracting media to fill in the emptiness that capitalism makes many of us feel, in other words, is therefore being exploited by a generation of media businesses more ruthless and more effective than any before it.

In the first chapter of this book, I outlined some of the more worrying aspects of how using social media can affect us, from making us more depressed, jealous of others, or dissatisfied with our lives, to keeping us awake. These are not the only consequences however. Many other writers and researchers, from Evgeny Morozov to Jaron Lanier, have warned us about how an overreliance on social media may harm us, our societies, and even our democracies. There are two dimensions of the widespread use of social media — with all the hedonic media consumption, emotion regulation, mediation, and exploitation I have discussed — to which I would like to draw attention.

The first aspect of our relationship to social media that is problematic is the relinquishment of control over those media. As a matter of principle, it cannot be ignored that Facebook and other social networks are private, and especially that, as publicly-listed companies, they are owned by precisely the forms of capital that are implicated in making us unhappy to begin with. When our journalism, our sociality, our political commentary, our creativity, and a growing number of other aspects of our society are being permanently recorded for commercial gain in ways that we cannot access except

as momentary consumers, we should be very cautious about meekly going along with this arrangement. As we will see, there are practical consequences in how this control is exercised over our media.

The second aspect of routine social media use that we should be careful about relates to information, or the lack of it, since most users' priorities are driven by emotion rather than the pursuit of information. As the world experiences an epidemic of ignorance, and the digital ecosystem shifts to what pundits are calling "post-factual," the flows of information and entertainment become confused as the drive to "fill the void" gets stronger. Using a hedonic, consumptive entertainment platform for our news and self-education is a dangerous and worrying development because it accommodates so easily the increasing *information resistance* of late-capitalist public spheres.

Both of these issues need to be understood thoroughly, and then fought against tirelessly. This chapter investigates these tendencies.

* * *

I. Enclosure, media alienation, memory, and imposed politics

We don't have a technology problem, we have a social problem.

Sir Tim Berners-Lee

Concerning situations arise when we allow any company in search of profit to mediate as much of our reality as social media platforms have been allowed to. Perhaps, allowing so much of what is important to us — our culture, entertainment, personal relationships, and even our own identities — to be mediated by a private company for their own commercial gain is something that we will look back on and wonder how on earth we let it happen. Even if birthdays aren't your thing, the conversion of birthdays from something that happens every year

to something that happens every year on Facebook is one that we should resist on political grounds alone — these things belong to us, not Facebook.

When Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan shared news of their pregnancy and three prior miscarriages on Facebook, it could only be interpreted as a subtle demonstration of how we are all meant to use Facebook — to share our intimate and personal stories with each other — but we should be cautious before following their example. Even if you genuinely found their story heart-warming or personal, as many people did, remember that the subtext of this communication was an encouragement that we feel more able to share such details of our own lives. Surely, Facebook will have hoped its users would think: If the founder of Facebook is doing this, it *must* be safe, so we can do it too? Mark Zuckerberg owns 28.2% of Facebook — by far the largest stake owned by anybody. Even if his data *are* sold to advertisers along with everybody else's, which is far from guaranteed, he still benefits from that sale and you don't. If he and his wife have managed to conceive, and that's what they want, then genuine congratulations to them, but the prominence of this information on Facebook is not as much of an unqualified reason to celebrate as the information itself. Never mind how it must have made couples feel who have been less fortunate, it is essentially an ad, and like much of Facebook, a means to make money from you.

Social media as enclosure

Enclosure is the process by which something that was formerly public, and shared by everybody, becomes private property. As Peter Linebaugh (2009) has written, enclosure is a fundamental aspect of how capitalism has operated since its earliest beginnings. One day a forest or a field would be common land, usable by everybody for any reasonable purpose, but swiftly it could be enclosed behind a

fence, ending the activities that people had commonly partaken in there. Use of the land would continue, but only for the specific people and in the specific ways that the new “owners” of the land permitted. A free, shared resource suddenly became privately controlled. The opposing idea to enclosure — that of the *commons* — has often been used as a metaphor for digital culture. Legal scholar and former US presidential hopeful Lawrence Lessig has urged this view as an alternative to the strict system of copyright, and founded a popular and widely used system of alternative content-licensing known as *creative commons*. For most of human history, Lessig has argued, culture has been “read-write” in the sense that anybody could borrow or incorporate any idea and build on it. Certainly in folk traditions this is often still the case. With the stricter enforcement of copyright that became commonplace in the twentieth century, Lessig has argued, we transitioned to “read-only” culture, in which culture had to be bought, usually from large corporations, and could not be changed, incorporated into new creativity, or to use Lessig’s word, “remixed.” Lessig’s view of the digital commons was that digitally-based cultures needed to be freed from these constraints so that they could return to being “read-write” cultures that could simultaneously support creative people’s livelihoods while enabling remixing. The old idea of the commons was, in effect, *remixed* to become a radical argument about the future of our culture in relation to computers.

The corresponding idea of *enclosure*, however, is a less common metaphor in the discussion of our relation to digital capital, but it too needs to be revived. Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood have argued provocatively that the transfer of our culture to the all-storing, zero-friction, capitalism-friendly “Cloud” represents a form of enclosure. The cloud, however, is mostly an architecture of storage, access to that storage, and transfer via that storage. Social media platforms, by contrast, contain an interactive, constantly updating repository that is accessible at almost any moment via a user interface and with which many of their users tend to have a strangely intimate relationship

— more than they often realise. As I have outlined in the previous chapter however, these platforms are also a ruthless means to extract value from the subjective vulnerabilities of their users, and while they feel like free services full of commonly-owned culture, they are not.

There are two intertwined senses in which social networks amount to a metaphorical enclosure of the aspects of life that come into contact with them, in the same spirit as that described by Linebaugh. Firstly, as described in the previous chapter, they have become increasingly general as they have sought to mediate more and more aspects of our lives, swallowing up any area that is emotionally meaningful in order to harness that emotion for commercial purposes. In *becoming* birthdays, to use the example from the last chapter, they enclose birthdays; but in *becoming* friendships, anniversaries, entertainment, escape, distraction, and so forth, they enclose these areas of life too. Being “social” media points to an enclosure of sociality itself. Judging by its ad campaigns, Facebook Inc. wants all friendship to be conducted and mediated by its platform.

The second sense in which social networks represent enclosure is in relation to the media and culture that its users upload there, and it is this sense that requires fuller exploration below. Contrary to the popular belief that when you put photos or other media on Facebook the ownership of the intellectual property of that media is transferred to them, you continue to “own” the media you upload. I wrap the word “own” in quotation marks here, however, because the terms and conditions of usage that you agree to every time you use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or most other social media platforms makes this remaining “ownership” pretty meaningless in relation to how these platforms can treat your content. They are a clever way of avoiding backlash. In 2011, image-sharing site Lockerz, now largely superseded by Twitter’s own image-sharing functionality, was found to be using the terms and conditions to transfer ownership outright. Twitpic, a similar service, was forced to change its terms and conditions because the platform forbade images that were hosted there from being sold to

any third party, such as news agencies. In both cases, the terms of use were later updated to eliminate these provisions and resemble those of pretty much every other social network's terms and conditions in respect to intellectual property: You technically "own" your media at law but you guarantee us a worldwide, indefinite license to do what we want with your media. In the previous chapter, Instagram's changes to its terms and conditions to allow explicitly their sale of your media without your knowledge told a similar story.

Especially in an age where nobody actually reads the terms and conditions, uploading meaningful aspects of your life to a digital platform necessarily means surrendering aspects of control over those media. While a user's intentions may point in one direction, it is almost never the same direction as the cold, hard profits that social media corporations are anticipating. That means that any loss of control over your media in the context of your relationship to these enterprises creates potential that these media are essentially misused. French literary critic Roland Barthes argued in "The Death of the Author" that the age in which the author was the primary authority on the meaning of their work should come to an end. On social media, the age in which we have the primary authority over the media we create has similarly come to an end — "the death of the uploader," one could call it in pseudo-Barthesian terms. On Facebook, the only way to destroy their control over your media is to destroy your media themselves by deleting them from Facebook. Given the emotional importance of this content and the reactions it has elicited such as comments and "likes," this is the equivalent of asking somebody to burn down their house to stop the bank from owning it. It is hard to watch some friends uploading images of their young children and other media that capture important or intimate moments in their lives without being reminded of how they are quietly being alienated from their own pictures. Some users are aware that in sharing media on social media platforms they are licensing their content potentially to be used commercially

by strangers for unspecified purposes, but the balance of priorities makes sharing more important. The majority however, are more focused on the act of sharing itself.

Loss of control

Not only does sharing these media on social networks enclose them by bringing them to a private platform over which we have no further influence; the conflicting intentions around such content-sharing also encloses and alienates us from each other. In September 2016 it was reported that an unnamed Austrian teenager was suing her parents for posting embarrassing baby pictures of her on Facebook, which they refused to remove. The young woman had not discovered the images until she joined Facebook, some three years after the images had been posted. “They knew no shame or limits,” she told Austria’s *Die ganze Woche* magazine, as reported in the *Irish Times*. “Whether I was sitting on the potty or naked in my crib, my every step was recorded photographically and, afterwards, made public.” The *Irish Times* reports that German law already makes it possible for teenagers from the age of fourteen and up to use the courts to make their parents remove content from social-network sites, and French law provides for a forty-five thousand euro fine or even prison for parents who upload embarrassing pictures of their children.

Even if the media shared are not personal or emotionally important, there is a broader picture of this enclosure that should be concerning in principle even if it has less practical impact. Memes, pictures of kittens or cake, videos of varying descriptions, and other media, whoever made them, and for whatever reason, are all covered by the same license. Whatever our impulses, or the messages we intend to communicate in the media we share, the fact of their immediately being licensed instantly to a large, multinational corporation is not nothing, and should at the very

least be a conscious part of our thinking. Anybody who would be unhappy about walking into a corporate boardroom with a USB stick containing an unpublished novel, an album of home-recorded songs, or baby pictures of their child and saying to the assembled executives as they slide it over the table: “Here guys, use these for whatever you like,” should consider that sharing such images on Facebook or other social media, as opposed to via email or some other private medium, is virtually the same in its implications for those materials. When Tim Berners-Lee announced the “world wide web” in 1991, the underlying HTML format it used was an open medium that anybody could use for any purpose, free of charge, and this commons-like approach was what built the early web. Despite the internet’s military history, the open standard of HTML was, in some senses, “the People’s medium.” Placing our culture and our digital lives within a privatised infrastructure is a drastic departure from this model, however. How can we let this happen to our culture itself; to our public sphere? The subjective motivations are understandable, but the overall outcome is still as ethically dubious as enclosure always has been.

Remembering what is best forgotten

The problems with allowing our culture to be enclosed, however, do not stop there. In the 1700s, Brazilian explorers deep in the rainforest of northwestern Brazil encountered a tribe called the Pirahã. The culture of this tribe is so unusual that, for example, some linguists think their language refutes the laws of language discovered by linguist Noam Chomsky that otherwise account adequately for every known human language on Earth. Another aspect of Pirahã culture that appears to be unique is how the experience of time is constructed. The Pirahã do not *remember* or make meaning out of memory or abstract symbols of things that have been or will be.

According to linguist Dan Everett, reported in the *New Yorker*, Pirahã language has “no numbers, no fixed color terms, no perfect tense, no deep memory, no tradition of art or drawing, and no words for ‘all,’ ‘each,’ ‘every,’ ‘most,’ or ‘few.’” Their culture reportedly “has no collective memory that extends back more than one or two generations, and no original creation myths.” The relationship between their language and their experience of time is of course reminiscent of French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan’s argument that the experience of time and of things having an identity over time is an effect of language that structures time in this way. At any rate, the Pirahã are interesting because as a culture they do not seek to remember everything or create a history; they seem odd precisely because most other cultures, including that of postmodern late capitalism, seek to remember so much.

I have already described in Chapter Two the timeline’s orientation around abundant, distracting novelty, as the user scrolls further and further down in rough reverse-chronological order; I have also outlined in Chapter Three how late-capitalist working conditions often reduce what Judy Wajcman has called “time sovereignty”; and I have discussed in Chapter Four the ways that social media, like much of capitalism, seeks to make itself memorable to us by becoming the important events such as birthdays, Christmases, New Years, and more unusual events too. Here we can observe yet another aspect of how time structures our culture, and how this is reflected in social networks. In comparison to the Pirahã, we seem to be obsessed with remembering everything. The fact that Facebook stores every event, be it the posting of a photo or the addition of a “friend,” as something that can have an “anniversary” years later is the expression of a specific cultural feature that should not necessarily be welcome in the architecture of social media platforms.

In *Delete*, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger has urged that in a digital age, the capacity to forget is both virtuous and necessary (2011). He cites a number of examples of individuals whose innocent, private

moments became incorporated into social media in various ways, both with and without their consent, and who paid enormous consequences as a result. The consequences are not always predictable, but like the young Austrian woman suing her parents, they often have privacy consequences. When nurse Rebecca Leighton was wrongly accused of murdering five people in Stepping Hill hospital in Manchester, the press plundered her Facebook past, using pictures of her drinking and fooling about with her friends as evidence of her moral inferiority and likely culpability. A quick search for her name in Google Images shows that most of these images are still publicly accessible years later.

Shakespeare scholar Emma Smith has also argued that “we need to remember how to forget,” calling the insistence on remembering everything *hyperthymesis*. “Memory has become prosthetic – outsourced to the internet, to external hard drive or cloud storage system. What should we remember? What should be preserved? The paradox of the digital future is the burden of the past that we are constantly archiving,” she says (2016).

Writing as a person of unusually accurate memory, I can attest that when people consider me to have inappropriately remembered too much, however innocently I might have done so, they seem to find it strange or even creepy. So why are we so happy for social media platforms to record everything that happens there in perfect detail in a database to which ultimately we have no direct access? As a technology, the database is of highly dubious origins, one of its first applications having been to keep track of concentration-camp inmates in Nazi Germany (Black, 2012). The insistence of digital capitalism on remembering everything about us, and particularly the ways in which social media platforms use our vulnerabilities to incorporate us into the enclosure of our own pasts, is something that needs to be subjected to far more scrutiny and critique at the very least. I suspect if more people saw it this way, it would quickly decline.

Politicised constructions of reality

Another serious issue with the way that social networks enclose meaningful and important aspects of our lives is the effect they may have on the content or information that they mediate in doing so, both inadvertently and deliberately. I have repeatedly said that technology reflects, rather than determines, our culture or behaviour. When Marshall McLuhan argued that “the medium is the message,” this was an erroneous and highly deterministic position. This doesn’t mean, however, that a technology designed and created by people with specific cultures, ideas, and motives, such as profit, can’t enable and encourage behaviours and political subjectivities over time — altering the meaning of the aspects of our culture that become filtered through that technology. Networks such as Facebook and Twitter are designed and built by human beings, mostly American, mostly white, mostly male, and mostly in California, who have a culturally-specific subjective relation to the media and culture for which their technologies have become the conduit, and who will inevitably build their platforms according to this outlook. At all times we should be asking ourselves: Does the way I use this technology, the way it has been designed, and/or the way it is operated, change the way I think about the areas of life to which it relates? Is what I see subtly cheapened, overvalued, or distorted by the medium? When, as with social media, technology can come to relate to so many areas of our lives, these questions should be constant, and posed with every use.

Is Facebook’s idea of a meaningful birthday the same as yours? Once your birthdays are an annual occurrence that is incomplete without Facebook, will you remember what birthdays were like before they were absorbed onto it? As I have alluded to, birthdays are clearly different in an era of mobile phones, emails, and digital cameras than they were before these technologies, not because the technologies themselves made them different but because Western capitalist culture wanted them to be different and the technologies

allowed this. But birthdays are too simple of an example to show fully why this is such a problem, so let's consider some more complex, if commonplace, cases.

Echoing Lawrence Lessig's work nearly a decade earlier, Rebecca MacKinnon (2012) reminds us that "Internet and telecommunications companies [...] create computer code that functions as a kind of law, in that it shapes what people can do and sometimes directly censors what they can see." Whereas the storage and perfect recall of events in our lives, as described above, can be problematic, the loss of control over our media can also be manifested by the reverse situation: Sometimes Facebook and other platforms want us to forget things that should be remembered.

On July 6th 2016 in Falcon Heights, St. Paul, Minnesota, against a backdrop of regular police shootings of African Americans and considerable public anger in response, officer Jeronimo Yanez fatally shot thirty-two year-old Philando Castile as he sat in his car after a tense exchange of words. Also in the car were Castile's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, and her four year-old daughter. In the moments immediately following the shooting, Reynolds began live-streaming video of still-alive Castile, who was slumped in the driver's seat of the car, and of her exchanges with the officer. "Lord please Jesus don't tell me that he's gone. Please don't tell me that he's gone. Please officer, don't tell me that you just did this to him. You shot four bullets into him, sir. He was just getting his license and registration, sir," Reynolds can be heard saying in the video. As technology website *The Next Web* reported the following day, "Roughly one hour after the video went live, the content mysteriously disappeared from the social network. Reynolds' Facebook profile was also temporarily removed." Widespread accusations of censorship and of deleting the evidence of a crime began almost immediately. *The Next Web* reported that "In a statement to *TechCrunch*, Facebook said the removal was due to a technical glitch and the video was restored about an hour after it went down, resurfacing with a graphic content warning."

Ok, an innocent mistake, one could say — the suggestion that Facebook’s content policies are aligned to the USA’s structures of power and enforcement is perhaps too much, for some. We’ll never know why Facebook actually deleted the video, whether it was an accidental “glitch” or gung-ho censorship that was reversed in response to public outcry. *The Register* reports that its deletion was demanded by law enforcement: “Multiple sources have told *The Register* that police removed video footage of Castile’s death from Facebook, potentially tampering with evidence.”

The same thing happened when twenty-three year-old Korryn Gaines was killed by police after a five-hour standoff, having posted videos to Facebook of various moments during the confrontation. Her Facebook and Instagram profiles were deleted, along with the videos they contained. This time, the request from law enforcement was made explicit.

Such deletion is not isolated to confrontations between US citizens and the police. Arabic-language Facebook pages *Quds* and *Shehab News Agency*, with five million and six million “likes” respectively, exclusively provide information about the Israel/Palestine conflict. Editorially they are largely sympathetic to the injustice suffered by Palestinians, and tend to focus on the actions of the Israeli government, but they are also critical of the Palestinian government at times. In late September 2016, the administrators of both pages found that their Facebook accounts had been suspended without warning. The following day, Facebook reinstated their accounts, telling Palestine-focused news website *Electronic Intifada*: “The pages were removed in error and restored as soon as we were able to investigate [...] Our team processes millions of reports each week, and we sometimes get things wrong. We’re very sorry about this mistake.” Again, as with the cases above in the United States, we may say: Fair enough, an innocent mistake. Yet again, however, this would be a somewhat naïve belief and incredulity about these Facebook account suspensions being a mere accident would not be unfounded. In the US, sympathy

for the Palestinians is seldom featured in mainstream media, and is politically indigestible in mainstream corridors of politics, largely due to the efforts of powerful pro-Israel lobbies. US politicians aspiring to any office must line up and offer unqualified support for Israel in order to be elected. In October 2016 Pink Floyd singer Roger Waters lost a major sponsorship deal with American Express for his 2017 US+Them tour because of his support for students in California who were organising for the Boycott Divest & Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the Israeli occupation.

Against this backdrop it is already difficult to see Facebook's interventions as accidental, but it gets worse — only days before the users' accounts were suspended, on September 12th 2016, Associated Press reported that Facebook had openly begun working with members of the Israeli government to censor content that was critical of Israel. The stated reasons for this intervention are that it would be in order to counter online "hate speech," and the violence that is said to result from it. Genuine hate speech and violence are obviously to be condemned outright, irrespective of whom they are directed at or what the political context may be, and there is undoubtedly a problem of vile anti-Semitic abuse amongst the abhorrent racism and bigotry that flows more generally across social media platforms from Facebook to Twitter to Reddit. Nevertheless there are reasons to believe that in this case it may be a bit more complicated than simply stopping hate speech. The Israeli government has been using social media posts to investigate those promoting the BDS movement that seeks to challenge Israeli policy with non-violent tactics, ever since the overt support of BDS was made illegal in Israel in 2011. Political speech about Israel is broadly monitored by the Israeli government, and according to investigative news website *The Intercept*, Israel has "begun actively surveilling Palestinians for the content of their Facebook posts and even arresting some for clear political speech." In May 2016, for example, makeup artist Nidal Atwan was jailed for forty-five days and fined eight hundred dollars for injudicious

comments she had made about a recent bus bombing. According to website *Samidoun*, astrophysics professor Dr Imad Barghouthi was sentenced in October 2016 to seven months in jail and a five-hundred-dollar fine “for posting about Palestinian politics and occupation on Facebook and social media.” *Al Jazeera* reports that Israel has detained or jailed approximately a hundred and fifty Palestinians for things they have said on Facebook since October 2015.

Ultimately, one might point out that these are the standard authoritarian actions of a government that feels threatened by political conversations online, as described by Evgeny Morozov and others, even if Israel is better at appearing to be a liberal democracy with freedom of expression than, say, China or Russia. This is hardly Facebook’s fault, you could say, and has nothing to do with “filling the void.” Surely, as long as online social platforms concentrate on responding objectively to the more serious moral transgressions like “hate speech,” the only political censorship will come from governments, as it always does? The difficult thing about that argument, however, is the way in which Facebook, or any other social network, can be quietly manipulated into towing the line and serving a political agenda while appearing to be neutral. They can be made to sway arguments in one direction or another. In the case of Facebook’s collaboration with Israel, there is a stark double-standard that has become intrinsic to the way conversations about Israel are controlled on Facebook, and that illustrates the worrying lack of accountability that Facebook and others are subjected to when they become the go-to platform for our political discussions. Members of the same Israeli government that have insisted that Facebook crack down on “hate speech” on Facebook, as well as outlawed entirely non-violent calls for BDS, are themselves guilty of very similar-looking hate speech — against Palestinians — without any repercussions at all, from Facebook’s censors or otherwise: In June 2014 for example, *Al Jazeera* reports that “Israeli lawmaker Ayelet Shaked published a status on Facebook [which she subsequently deleted] declaring the

‘entire Palestinian people as the enemy.’” *Electronic Intifada* reports that her post “was shared more than one thousand times and received almost five thousand ‘Likes.’” What we see here is that on the one hand, Israeli politicians are insisting (successfully) that Facebook deletes content to crack down on what they determine to be hate speech, whilst at the same moment they themselves are guilty of the very same transgression, albeit with the balance of political power squarely on their side. Similar utterances are either sanctioned or not, purely by virtue of which side of the dispute they happen to fall on and who wields the power to influence their censorship, and in the end we see that it has far more to do with suppressing criticism of Israel than controlling hate speech.

Whether the imposition of this double-standard onto Facebook’s users is internal, is imposed from outside, or both — whether you think the erasures described above are truly accidental misfirings of some algorithm, routine due process of law, or effectively an editorial policy — the picture they reveal is ultimately a damning one. It shows that to embrace for-profit corporations such as Facebook as the de-facto home of political speech is to entrust these important political conversations to companies that will comply with whichever political power (or invisible financial pressure) is most prudently appeased. From a panic-stricken car in St. Paul, Minnesota, to a house in Bethlehem, occupied West Bank, one of the most worrying issues about our public sphere being enclosed within social media is when political or cultural subjectivity is imposed onto the content that is uploaded, in a way that users have little recourse to prevent.

As stated above, the provenance of networks such as Facebook and Twitter is mostly North American, white, and male, and as we have seen above, it is inescapable that the specific cultural subjectivity that these represent, both separately and together, would not be expressed in the workings of social media platforms. In the case of Facebook’s censure of evidence of police brutality or its de-activation of the accounts of Palestinian activists, there has been outcry, largely due

to the polarised, and highly political nature of the issues involved. The imposition of subjectivity doesn't only occur in relation to these types of issues, however. It can also occur more subtly and in more intimate, cultural areas of life, such as in gender relations and how these are expressed in the representation of our own bodies and those of others. Here too, it has been met with outcry.

As I have argued in Chapter Two, one of the primary functions of the timeline is emotional self-regulation and stimulation, and *arousal* in the broadest sense is an essential part of this subjective experience. As we have seen from the hedonic consumption of “food porn” and so forth, Facebook and Instagram's businesses are dependent on making distinctions between what are acceptable stimuli for arousal and what are not, getting the line between taboo and acceptability as close as possible to taboo enjoyment without actually leaving the realm of social acceptability or revealing their strategy.

The history of taboo around the human body, and particularly in relation to its sexual functions, is as old as culture itself, and yet this subjectivity is not always manifested in outright censorship. Instead, cultures have often responded by enclosing sexual taboos in specific cultural forms, often controlled by men. As art critic and theorist John Berger (1990) reminds us, depictions of women dominate one category of European painting more than any other — the nude — and Americans spend 13.1 billion dollars on pornography every year. As always, there is little reason why we shouldn't expect the same cultural features to extend into our use of the web, and Ethan Zuckerman (2008) has gone so far as to argue that the appearance of pornography on any digital platform is the first sign that it is functional enough for everyday use: “Porn is a weak test for the success of participatory media – it's like tapping a mike and asking, ‘Is it on?’ If you're not getting porn in your system, it doesn't work.” In a way, this is quite an admission.

Let us not forget that Facebook's own provenance was originally as *Facemash*, a means of comparing people's “hotness,” which fell just

on the wrong side of that threshold and nearly got Mark Zuckerberg kicked out of Harvard (Kirkpatrick, 2010). As a means to avoid revealing this provenance, social networks have tended to embrace the other, puritanical extreme instead — Facebook’s internal censorship guide is even referred to informally as “the bible” (Webster, 2012). However, like Queen Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, said upon seeing her guilty self represented in a play, they “doth protest too much, methinks.” The consequence is a patriarchal, controlling, automatic sexualisation of the female body.

Female nipples, according to the enforced content guidelines of Facebook and Instagram, seem to be inherently sexual, and until recently were completely banned on Facebook, even in cases where the picture obviously depicted a mother breastfeeding or some other patently non-sexual scenario. In October 2016, Facebook removed a campaign video about breast cancer by the Swedish Cancer Society, despite the video being entirely comprised of cartoon animation, and featuring pink circles to represent the breasts of the women in the video, who were showing the viewer how to check for lumps. Facebook apologised, telling the BBC “We’re very sorry, our team processes millions of advertising images each week, and in some instances we incorrectly prohibit ads.” This sounds awfully familiar to Facebook’s other apologies, above. In January 2016, a woman named Rowena Kincaid, incidentally a former picture editor for the BBC, posted a picture of a rash on her breast that was a readily identifiable symptom of the stage four breast cancer she had been diagnosed with some years earlier, in a bid to motivate others with the same symptoms to seek treatment. Facebook censored (i.e. removed) the close-up image of her breast because it happened to include the nipple, but later reinstated it claiming that “In this instance we made a mistake and have reinstated the photograph.” Again, an ever-so-innocent apology, but no recognition of the wider pattern of which these apologies are a regular part. Kincaid, who died in September 2016 after a seven-year battle with cancer, told the *Independent* that

“I wasn’t out to offend anyone. [The picture] looks like something out of a medical journal.” Conversely, when breast cancer left a woman named Alison Habbal without a nipple on one breast, she was able to circumvent these rules and share an image of an ornate tattoo she had received in that area of her body without being censored beyond the obfuscation that the tattoo had already provided. This latter case is somewhat surprising, given the hysteria and hyper-sexualisation that has frequently been imposed on how women represent themselves: It would be easy to imagine a situation in which the image was censored anyway, despite the image not technically meeting the “nipple” criterion for censorship. The narrow preoccupation with women’s breasts and especially nipples as some sort of watershed for digital content is at once bizarre and entirely predictable given both the breast’s sexualisation, and the psychoanalytical significance of the breast as a site of comfort and pleasure for nursing children (Yalom, 1997). But this kind of technical ontology for what the “community” should be expected to tolerate is not always quite so stubbornly fixed on specific signifiers, and images are indeed censored for their content alone. In March 2015, artist Rupi Kaur’s posts, which subtly depicted, according to the *Daily Telegraph*, a “fully clothed woman lying in bed with a period stain behind her,” were deleted — *twice*. Instagram’s “Community Guidelines” “prohibit sexual acts, violence and nudity – they do not mention anything about periods,” the *Telegraph* reports.

In another example, from September 2016, Norwegian writer Tom Egeland posted an article on Facebook entitled “Seven photographs that changed the history of warfare,” accompanied by the seven photographs. One of these images was the iconic “napalm girl” photo taken by Nick Ut in 1972 that showed several children including a naked Phan Thi Kim Phúc — then a nine year-old girl — escaping from a napalm attack. Egeland’s account was promptly suspended. According to the *Guardian*, when Egeland’s newspaper *Aftenposten* disclosed publicly that this had happened, they were contacted by Facebook with a message stating that “Any photographs of people

displaying fully nude genitalia or buttocks, or fully nude female breast, will be removed,” and asking that they “either remove or pixelize” the image. Before they could do this, however, Facebook deleted the post altogether. After a few days, and major public outcry, Facebook eventually backed down, stating that “While we recognize that this photo is iconic, it’s difficult to create a distinction between allowing a photograph of a nude child in one instance and not others.”

Fear about sexual imagery taking over the web is as old as the web itself. In 1993, for example, the inventor of the World Wide Web Sir Tim Berners-Lee was reportedly against the implementation of inline images on web pages because, somewhat prophetically, he feared people would post too much pornography. More than two decades later, the same debate is ongoing. Content enforcement on Instagram, for example, is reportedly a game of constant cat-and-mouse, and there are said to be more than a million pornographic images on the platform, often hidden under hashtags that use Arabic script, accented characters, suggestive-looking emojis and other means to avoid Anglophone control systems (Khalid, 2016).

This is not to say that it would be better not to implement any controls on content. As the work of psychologist Gary Wilson (2015) and others has shown, consumption of sexually explicit materials can sometimes be detrimental, especially to young people, and the internet greatly facilitates this access. Rather, the point is that the very form of media consumption that social media entail, the ways they are used, the economic relationships that they comprise (as outlined in Chapter Four), and the way that these intersect with political and social issues are all fundamentally flawed. Facebook is, after all, a company that has no compunction about allowing advertisers to target only white people (Angwin & Parris, 2016). The issue is not so much the presence or absence of sexually explicit material, but that as with the question of what is “hate speech” or what is evidence of police brutality, the question of what is or is not sexual about the body cannot be entrusted to commercial, unaccountable

organisations whose main priorities are their own profits and share price. The hegemonic reassertion of specific cultural subjectivities, and even downright prejudice, is virtually inevitable.

We know from Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's political critique of the mass media *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) that media ownership matters, and has implications for the use of media to challenge hegemonic power structures. Who owns the media we rely on to learn about the world has always had an influence on what we are allowed to learn about, and how we perceive the aspects of the world that are signified by those media. Whether it is removing evidence of police murdering innocent citizens, censoring media sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, or insisting that we sexualise the naked — often female — body, the lack of control that we experience when our culture is enclosed into a private, commercial database is both a feature and a flaw.

As we desperately “fill the void” on social media, we are nonetheless encouraging and participating in exactly this process, effectively gifting our culture, our public sphere, and the emotions they elicit to the most sophisticated, manipulative, and yet unaccountable form of media ownership that we have ever seen. We should not be surprised when the representations they make with our culture turn out to favour those who hold power and influence.

* * *

II. After the fact: The problem of affective content, ignorance and democracy

All I know is what's on the internet.

Donald J. Trump

People in this country have had enough of experts.

Michael Gove

Some of these things are true and some of them lies. But they are all good stories.

Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*

Americans appear to be losing touch with reality.

Thomas E. Patterson

The second worrying consequence of the “filling the void” pattern relates to the mixed usage of social media platforms. In Chapter Two, four essential qualities of the social media timeline were proposed that each enable and encourage this behaviour in different ways, combining to powerful effect. One of these features is especially relevant to the role of information and its consumption: the *mixture* of dramatically different forms of media content found in the timeline, including the juxtaposition of news and information with non-informational media. Broadly, I’ve argued that the main usage of the social media timeline is affect-driven; a form of hedonic media consumption that provides emotion regulation by means of distraction from, and compensation for, poor affect such as loneliness, distress and boredom. There is no denying, however, that some people do use social media to find out what is happening in a factual sense, and journalistic content does indeed also appear in the timeline, alongside the selfies, “listicles,” memes and holiday snaps. According to a study by Pew Research Centre published in May 2016, 62% of US adults get some of their news via social media, and 18% do so often. Facebook even added a “trending” feature in 2014 that organised media related to current topics in a way that was easier to browse. The question is: are these two areas of usage compatible? If you are looking for information about the world via the same means that you “fill the void”, might these ontologically distinct uses not become dangerously “blurred and often difficult to tell apart” as Natalie Fenton (2012) has argued?

Since social media are often said to be the cause of misinformation, it is worth saying something initially about the

status of “information” generally — particularly that of a political or civic nature. Journalists have long held that the “right to know” is the cornerstone of democracy, and according to a qualitative study of the professional epistemology of journalists by media sociologist Mark Deuze (2005), journalists consider themselves an essential service that provides the public with exactly this information. Besides the somewhat out-dated positivism about “knowledge” and objective “truth,” the problem here is that audiences may no longer consider the provision of information as such an intrinsically valuable service. As Adam Curtis has alluded to in his 2016 film *HyperNormalisation*, in a postmodern, neoliberalised world where it has become impossible for most people to be sure of what is fact and what is not, enlightenment concepts such as the “truth” are overused and overemphasised to the point they are meaningless and cease to have the currency they once had. Consequently, people have begun to seek out information less and less, instead preferring entertainment and other distractions as a vain attempt to bolster their emotional survival. Affect and belief have increasingly come to dominate, and people tend settle on whichever speculations or narratives will justify their existing subjectivities.

The situation that results from this development has increasingly been labeled as “post-factual” or “post truth”. A looser relationship to empirically oriented forms of “truth” is nothing new, but it is important that in each instance we understand its provenance, particularly where technology is said to be responsible.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.

Whatever the reader may or may not feel about Arendt's overall political persuasions, these words also ring truer than ever, more than sixty years later, for the "ideal" subject of late capitalism — an informational landscape that not only encourages and rewards this more complicated relationship with information, but often requires it. Political media scholars Natalie Fenton (2012), Thomas E. Patterson (2010), and Markus Prior (2007) have all written of how an abundance of media that are in some way more appealing than news and information can lead to "information inequality". To understand such a situation as a form of inequality is instructive, and is more than a simple metaphor. Just like material and social forms of inequality, information inequality has the tendency to worsen over time. Patterson has said that:

A consequence is that the knowledge gap between the more informed and the less informed is expanding. In today's high-choice media environment, the less informed opt for entertainment programming while the more informed include the news junkies.

Another respect in which information inequality is like other forms of inequality required by capitalism is how it exploits those who have less, encouraging and then feeding on ignorance. This happens in a number of ways. To start with, as stated in the opening chapter of this book, there is the sheer degree to which those in the (over)developed world have become complicit in things they don't agree with. When people are confronted with the idea that they are implicated in making worse the very elements of the world or of their own lives that they perceive to be problematic or scary, or that they are contradictory in some other way, they feel undermined and seek alternative analyses that avoid such contradictions, even if they are far-fetched. With man-made climate change for example, it is much easier to drive an SUV, eat beef and dairy products, and travel by air regularly, if you decide that carbon emissions have no impact, and

that the vast majority of climate scientists who say otherwise are either wrong, or perpetrating a global conspiracy to suppress the emission of greenhouse gases. The same pattern of wilful, consumption-driven ignorance exists in other areas too: sweatshop labour, harmful food additives, crop-driven deforestation such as that for palm oil or soya, and the raw material supply chains for electronic components.

A second factor leading to information-averse media consumption and information inequality is that the sources that were once trusted and considered authoritative — particularly government and the mainstream press — have lost much of their credibility, as their firm, deceptive loyalty to entrenched power and capital has been slowly revealed. It is a common occurrence to hear people from nearly any part of the political spectrum say that the media are “biased,” and regardless of the subjectivities that give way to that feeling, it is often true — even if not in the ways alleged. As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argued in *Manufacturing Consent*, the mass media all-too-often prioritise the interests of the wealthy elite by whom they are usually owned and sometimes subsidised (1988). Journalism’s increasing reliance on advertising, as its other revenue streams have declined, only exacerbates this problem.

Finally, there has been a catastrophic breakdown in the way people are educated. A neoliberal, late-capitalist education system is increasingly one that teaches people to function, and to perform at ever-higher levels, but not necessarily to think critically. It emphasises standardised testing and stresses “delivery” over enquiry; “resilience” over versatility. While ever-greater numbers of people go to university, universities themselves continue to be mercilessly reconfigured around the rules of the market. Even going to university is by no means accessible to all. A 2016 study found that the decreasing availability of need-based financial support for undergraduate education in the US meant decreased degree completion rates (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). The “right to know” is not only disappearing from journalism; it is disappearing from education too.

From our participation as consumers in ways that are detrimental to our own long-term interests, to our media outlets' deference to a status quo that is highly unequal in the balance of power, to the destruction of education according to market rules, it would seem that entrenched structures of power and capital are at the roots of information inequality in a variety of different ways, and capital is usually the primary beneficiary too.

More concerning still are the effects of a post-factual relationship between people and their media. If verifiable information is optional while socially-driven communication and affect are essential, it is both easier and more pleasant to be ignorant. In a highly connected world this makes for a lethal combination that allows ignorance to grow and spread faster than ever, transforming the last vestigial aspects of democracy, such as elections and referenda, into vicious, destructive, polluting mob-rule. The combination of widespread anger, misinformation and ignorance in relation to public matters such as the environment, or the political status of disempowered people is, at the time of writing, beginning to produce some high-profile outcomes. On the morning of June 24th 2016, people around the world woke up to find that the electorate of the United Kingdom had narrowly voted to leave the European Union in a bitterly fought referendum that had disrupted political conventions and alliances that were decades old. Four and a half months later, on the morning of November 9th, the world was forced to contend with the news that the people of the United States had elected infamous property tycoon and reality TV personality Donald Trump as president of the United States.

Whether events such as the British vote to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump were working-class rebellions against neoliberalism that have been horribly misdirected towards immigrants, or plain old nationalism and xenophobia, is a matter for other more qualified writers to determine and consider. Either way, both political events are inescapably born of widespread ignorance — sometimes wilful, sometimes enforced, and both have

been forged in this “post-factual” scenario. In theory, elections and referenda are supposed to be fair, democratic exercises that allow important political agency and self-determination to be exercised by citizens themselves. The problem is that referenda, elections, and other democratic exercises only work when people actually have enough information on which to make an informed decision about how to vote, but this has been far from the case in both instances. According to the *Washington Post*, large numbers of people in Britain were googling “what is the eu” [sic] during and immediately after the EU vote (Fung, 2016). Many of the areas that had higher proportions of people who voted to leave the European Union were areas that benefitted most from EU funding (Cadwalladr, 2016). An ITV poll, taken more than three months after the vote, showed that the main reason by far that people in the UK voted to leave the European Union was so that the UK could set its own immigration policy and prevent the Freedom of Movement guaranteed by the EU treaties to citizens of member states, whom many voters believed to be causing overcrowding and placing a strain on public services. Despite the obvious racism in this belief, one of the other problems with it was that it was entirely inaccurate: EU migrants contributed a net benefit to the UK’s public finances (O’Leary, 2016), and the overcrowding was largely due to austerity policies that had led to cuts in public services. A feature in the UK’s *Telegraph* from May 2016, one month before the referendum, showed that membership of the UK Independence Party was highest in the areas with fewest immigrants (Dodds, 2015). Shortly after the vote, a man interviewed in the street in the South Yorkshire town of Barnsley told the *Huffington Post* that “it’s all about immigration. It’s to stop the Muslims from coming into this country. [...] The movement of people in Europe, fair enough, but not from Africa, Syria, Iraq, everywhere else.” This was despite the fact that EU membership only affected the movement of citizens from other member states.

Similarly with Donald Trump’s rise to power, ignorance — and all the prejudice and bigotry that tend to stem from it — were

central features of that campaign. According to a May 2016 survey of registered US voters, 65% of Trump's supporters believed that Barack Obama was a Muslim, and 61% believed he was born outside of the United States — making him ineligible to be President. The expression of anti-immigrant sentiments was again a common trope, and Trump's claim that Mexicans arriving in the US were likely to be "rapists", for example, was widely reported. In the run-up to his emphatic victory, Trump — who had repeatedly declared he would forcibly remove millions of undocumented immigrants, and began the process of doing so once elected — told supporters at his rallies that were his opponent Hillary Clinton elected, she would allow more than six hundred million immigrants to enter the United States, tripling the country's population "in one week."

Theodor Adorno (1957) wrote of anti-Semitic propaganda in the USA in the early 1950s that:

Fascist propaganda attacks bogies rather than real opponents, that is to say, it builds up an *imagery* of the Jew, or of the Communist, and tears it to pieces, without caring much how this imagery is related to reality.

As Primo Levi wrote in Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in 1974, "Every era has its fascism." Upon reading Adorno's words it is hard not to be reminded of Trump's claims about Mexicans, Nigel Farage's characterisation of Eastern Europeans as more likely to claim benefits or be criminal, the widespread portrayal of Muslims as sympathetic to acts of terror, the racist cartoons of French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* or the vile billboards produced by the UK Independence Party to encourage people to vote to leave the European Union. All are undoubtedly instances of the same pathology.

Societies are far more vulnerable to the effects of malicious, racist, or wildly inaccurate media when they are not interested in their verification, yet such media are highly popular and this popularity

only exacerbates their effects. *Fox News*, which once fought a lawsuit in Florida on the basis that the freedom of speech afforded under the First Amendment gave them the right to deliberately publish incorrect stories (Phillips, 2004), is the United States' most watched TV news (Gallup, Inc., 2013). UK newspaper *The Sun* is the country's most popular print newspaper (Press Gazette, 2015), despite publishing repeated and serious factual errors, such as the assertion that the European Court of Human Rights is an institution of the European Union, which any journalist writing about such matters should know is false (Wagner, 2014). The connection between these two outlets is not only that consumers tend to seek them because they will confirm how consumers already *feel*. The other connection is that they are both owned by companies controlled by right-wing Australian-American tycoon Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch tried to jump on the social media bandwagon too, and bought pre-Facebook social media platform MySpace in 2005. He was reportedly too focused on making money from the site, and sold it in 2011 after haemorrhaging both money and users, and being overtaken in terms of total users by Facebook in 2008 (Rushton, 2013).

The post-factual and social media

By now it should be clear that whatever the deterministic arguments out there, the conflation of fact and fiction and the preference for inaccurate media that accords with existing anger, outrage, and hatred is not in any way *caused* by, or unique to, social media or digital technology. Yet there are good reasons why such topics must be addressed in a book of which one unifying theme is social media. Whatever your opinion of Black Lives Matter, the British referendum on leaving the European Union, Donald Trump, Palestine, or global warming, you will appreciate that social media are frequently a means by which these types of heavily polarised public debates are

taking place, largely because of their emotional import and capacity for arousal. This is particularly the case for younger people, perhaps because, as media commentator Geert Lovink (2012) has argued, “another consequence of Web 2.0 is that news media are, at best, secondary sources. [...] [F]or most young people ‘old media’ lost their legitimacy a long time ago.”

“Web 2.0” was the positivist buzzword that referred to a web that was interactive, and which primarily featured content uploaded by other users. Media commentator Andrew Keen was largely dismissed as overly pessimistic when he characterised “web 2.0” as a “cult of the amateur” — a naïve obsession with the wisdom of “noble amateurs”, that “[threatened] to turn our intellectual traditions and institutions upside down” (2008). Yet this view of the web now seems relatively palatable compared to how, a decade later, the “web 2.0” story has actually unfolded. Likewise, the famous *XKCD* cartoon in which one character is unable to go to bed because “somebody is wrong on the internet” seems awfully benign given how things have played out. Larger numbers of people than ever seem to be wrong on the internet. It has been said that “a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth has got its boots on.” In a delightfully ironic demonstration of exactly the unreliability of social media, this quote can be easily found misattributed to a variety of people, rendered in “word porn” form in elegant typography. Winston Churchill and Mark Twain both feature prominently as would-be authors of the quote, and it is frequently attributed to Twain in the year 1919, despite the fact that he died in 1910. The true quote is much older, and its original idea goes back as far as 1710 when writer Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, observed that “Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it,” from which it has slowly developed (O’Toole, 2014). In any case, the sentiment is an astute one, and is almost prophetic in how applicable it is to the way social media are used, both to circulate and to consume inaccurate media. Indeed, in a rigorous study of how misinformation is transferred around on social media, Del Vicario et al (2016) found that:

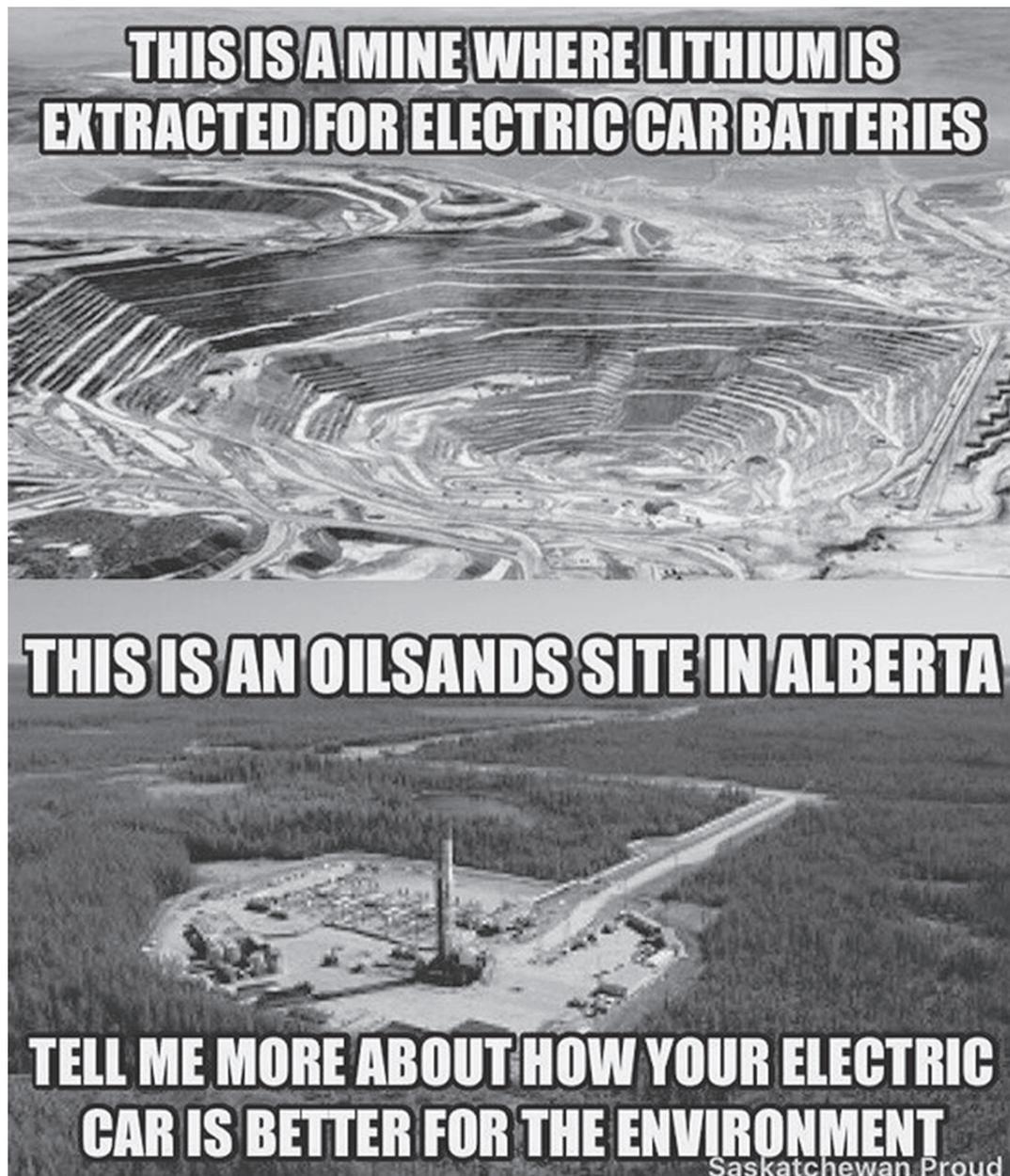
Users tend to aggregate in communities of interest, which causes reinforcement and fosters confirmation bias, segregation, and polarization. This comes at the expense of the quality of the information and leads to proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumors, mistrust, and paranoia.

There is of course no denying that “filling the void” on social media platforms that are also increasingly used for access to news and informational media allows users to indulge readily in rumour, fantasy, conspiracy, defamation of character, and other patterns of misinformation, much faster and more efficiently than with any other form of media — ever. In Chapter Two, I referred to the popularity of hoax images and the appealing fantasies they contain as an example of how affect, even when triggered by a completely fictitious representation of the world, can have more value than verifiable information itself. The November 2015 case of Canadian journalist Veerender Jubbal is a good example of how widespread ignorance, of which digital misinformation is a primary symptom, can be harmful and dangerous, and is easily exacerbated in the ways that digital social networks are used to “fill the void.” Jubbal, who is a Sikh, had shared a harmless selfie of himself in the reflection of his bathroom mirror, taken using the built-in camera of an iPad. After the attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people, members of the gaming community who were angry at Jubbal’s characterisation of some computer games as racist, manipulated his mirror selfie was so that it showed him wearing what appeared to be a suicide vest and the iPad on which he was taking the image looked like some sort of book with an Islamic-looking binding, presumably a Qur’an. The gamers had also manipulated Jubbal’s eyebrows to make him look more devious, and added a large, phallic sex toy in the background of the image, in a bid to use homosexuality to undermine both Jubbal and the pantomime-villain Islamic terrorist he became to those who didn’t know him. The image was identified as a fake, but not before Italian TV news

channel TG24 had tweeted the picture and conservative Spanish daily newspaper *La Razon* had put the image on its front page. There are a number of issues in this case that combined to terrible effect: the first is of course that social media enabled the spread of this image — cue widespread determinism. But the other factors in play here point to deeper societal issues. As a Sikh, Jubbal wears a turban in the image. While some Muslim men also wear turban-like headwear, these usually look quite different to Sikh turbans, yet nobody who shared the image was apparently interested or knowledgeable enough as to this difference to care. Another issue in this case was the desire of so many people to believe unquestioningly in Jubbal's image, particularly as a somewhat hirsute man of colour, as a portrayal of exactly the stereotypical terrorist that they had wanted to imagine. To produce such an image is abhorrent, but the actions of the gamers who did so revealed a far more widespread ignorance and racism.

Still images are one of the most potent formats via which misinformation can travel. As media sociologist Martin Hand reminds us, “At the level of theory, the advent of digital imaging is thought to have played a significant role in *destabilizing* these modern ways of seeing and knowing, radically questioning the objectivity or truth effect of the analogue photograph” (2012). When John Berger said “the relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled” (1990), he could not have foreseen quite how much the digital era would prove him right.

The image opposite is another good example of the kind of misleading visual content that is easily spread on social media, and which can cause real harm over time. It purports to expose the hypocrisy of environmentalists who have urged the use of electric and hybrid-electric vehicles. What the black-and-white representation of the image here cannot show is that the “lithium mine” at the top is a harsh shade of brown, while the “oilsands” site is idyllic and green by comparison. Far more troubling than the way the two images are placed next to each other to encourage the viewer's favour of the



lower image, however, is the fact that the item as a whole is completely inaccurate. According to blogger Mark Sumner (2016), the top image is in fact a copper mine, while the bottom, although related to tar sands oil extraction, is far from typical. Lithium is not mined at all — it is extracted from highly saline water, in harsh areas that already have little wildlife. Tar sands, on the other hand, have their oil extracted in an energy-intensive process very similar to mining that involves blasting and drilling, and which can require 42,475.27

litres (1,500 cubic feet) of natural gas to produce a single barrel of oil (Sumner, 2016).

The problem is not only that the image and its text have been deliberately fabricated to mislead, but that there is a clear cultural precedent for the existence and spread of such media, right down to the typeface — Impact Regular, usually uppercase, in white with a black outline. The familiar, idiomatic features of such media invite them to be categorised as a form of “folk” informational media, and can situate them subtly but unambiguously outside of mainstream media, encouraging those who have learned to distrust or ignore mainstream media to pay more attention. While experts may well be able to identify and debunk such images, the vast majority of people, who are viewing media in order to “fill the void,” will neither attempt to do so, nor necessarily even imagine that the information they contain could be false.

Sometimes, rather than being deliberately misleading, untruths can spread online because they represent some sort of extreme, if believable, fantasy that is so outrageous, surprising, or upsetting that nobody bothers to check if it is true. A clear example of this can also be found in relation to the environment. In October 2016, an article appeared in *Outside Magazine* entitled “Obituary: Great Barrier Reef (25 Million BC–2016).” Its subtitle read “*Climate change and ocean acidification have killed off one of the most spectacular features on the planet.*” In addition to the horrific state of affairs implied by the headline — the Great Barrier Reef being a unique site of biodiversity and natural beauty — there was another problem: It was a wild exaggeration. After a recent “bleaching event,” an occurrence in which corals expel algae and turn white, up to 22% of the corals in the Great Barrier Reef are thought to be dead. While this is obviously a tragedy, it is also misleading in a way that jeopardises the other 78% that remains alive. “The message should be that it isn’t too late for Australia to lift its game and better protect the GBR, not [that] we should all give up because the GBR is supposedly dead,” Terry

Hughes, director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, told the *Huffington Post* (2016). Here, while the story is based on a factual event, its hyperbole does far more harm than good. By overstating the case of how bad things are, it risked undermining the possibility that action might actually be taken.

Although in this case the item in question is an ordinary blog article, hosted outside of social networks, its rapid spread was still facilitated via social media. When highly salient media spread quickly, it is said that they have “gone viral.” The capacity for media to “go viral” is greatly amplified by social media, which afford sharing with far greater ease. Features such as lists of content that is “trending” only enable further sharing, and Facebook has reportedly included false news stories in its “trending” section a number of times since automating the feature in 2016 (Dewey, 2016). The ability for rapid dissemination of content need neither be cast as an unqualified good or bad, but it is a hallmark of how social network platforms function, and cases such as those above show that it must be treated very cautiously. Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013), who have greatly clarified and elucidated the concept of *virality* in its present usage, remind us that the origins of thinking about information according to this metaphor lie in the field of marketing. This provenance should come as no surprise, given that the social networks across which such “viral” flows of information occur are themselves so commercially orientated. It should also remind us that social media are never truly the beginning of the story.

Can we blame social media?

Events such as the British vote to leave the European Union, and especially the election of Donald Trump, resulted in a new wave of determinism in social media criticism. The logic appeared to be that these events were possible because of a “post-factual” relationship to

media, against the backdrop of which there is “fake news” spreading on Facebook, and therefore that Facebook was largely responsible not only for the social divisions revealed by these issues, but for the lowest value in the Pound Sterling for thirty-one years and for President Trump. Technology journalist Olivia Solon wrote in the *Guardian* that “Rather than connecting people – as Facebook’s euphoric mission statement claims – the bitter polarization of the social network over the last eighteen months suggests Facebook is actually doing more to divide the world” (2016). This should not be a convincing argument. If nothing else, it is largely a re-emergence of the same anxieties about user-generated content that had been heard from many of journalism’s old guard after the advent of “web 2.0”.

When it was put to Mark Zuckerberg that inaccurate media shared via Facebook might even have been a contributing factor in the election of Donald Trump, he responded that “the idea that fake news on Facebook... influenced the election... is a pretty crazy idea.” At least in one important sense, Zuckerberg is not entirely wrong. Any sociologist familiar with the Rust Belt states (Hochschild, 2016), or the Leave-voting regions of England for that matter (Davies, 2016), will attest that there were and still are cultural, social and economic issues amongst the populations of these regions that had been brewing for years before the historic votes in 2016. To place the blame squarely on Facebook, even with all of the “fake news” that is distributed on it, is a determinist sticking-plaster solution that allows mainstream journalists to pat themselves on the back. Not only does it embrace the idea that conventional sources of news are never inaccurate or biased — an idea in which news audiences lost faith decades ago, it also allows the broader forces that drive “filling the void” to be left entirely unchallenged. If you wanted to find evidence for Facebook helping the Trump campaign, the fact that they were able to use Facebook’s targeted ads to spread low-tech policy videos or produce a ten-fold increase in merchandising sales — providing much-needed campaign funding, would be a much safer hypothesis (Bertoni, 2016). Yet the

unwavering belief in social media-powered digital misinformation as a direct causal factor persists. Computational social scientist Michela Del Vicario and colleagues tell us that “Digital misinformation has become so pervasive in online social media that it has been listed by the [World Economic Forum] as one of the main threats to human society” (2016). The fact that the World Economic Forum would be keen to blame technology should also be no surprise, and the WEF report to which Del Vicario and colleagues refer is an impressive work of superficial technologically-determinist pseudo-analysis that ignores entirely the interplay of culture and capital, worrying instead about how what it calls “digital wildfires” cause people to lose money.

The common antidote to technological determinism is to speak of what technology *allows*, rather than what it drives or causes, and we have seen above that social media do indeed *allow* some aspects of the post-factual era to be worse. While Facebook may be irresponsible, disinterested in the news, and exploitative of the “filling the void” pattern however, as a platform it is more of an enabler than a root cause. Social media’s enabling role does need to be subjected to critique and exposure, and Mark Zuckerberg has even described some solutions to how these enabling effects may be ameliorated (2016), but we should be very clear that the affective potency of “fake news” and similar content, is part of the “filling the void” phenomenon described in this book, and is therefore primarily an aspect of the societies we live in, as opposed to the platforms we use. If we are to be critical of Facebook, we need to formulate better, more sophisticated arguments that can’t be so easily deflected or batted away.

While Facebook and other social media are inescapably part of how information — and misinformation — spread through the public sphere, it isn’t Facebook that might have skewed people’s understanding of the issues, so much as the way people are already accustomed to using Facebook: For “filling the void”, rather than learning in earnest about the world. Media and communications scholar Natalie Fenton has cogently observed of social media

that “people rarely have democratic enhancement at the top of their agendas and use the internet far more for entertainment purposes than for informational gain” (2012). As media scholar Thomas E. Patterson (2010) says: “those who rhapsodize about the ‘information age’ ignore the human factor. Although public affairs information is more readily available than ever before, the key aspect, as it has always been, is the demand for it.” If the affective experience of social media is akin to fried foods and stuffed-crust pizza, media that feature information itself, especially where they may be contradictory to pre-existing dispositions and opinions, are the equivalent of reminding people to eat their vegetables; they are the steaming plate of un-seasoned boiled spinach of the online media world.

If the emotional distress of late capitalism makes us so desperate for distraction, even if it is in the form of completely untrue news stories, is it not this state of affairs which we should be taking issue with? Journalists blaming Mark Zuckerberg for widespread misinformation before they blame Rupert Murdoch, as they did after Trump was elected, are simply trying not to bite the hand that feeds them. Of course there are things that Facebook and Twitter could do to mitigate the effects of how the spread of misinformation is enabled by their platforms, and the choice to lay off the human editors of their “trending” section and replace them with algorithmic functionality does not, in hindsight, look like a good move. However this move should remind us of Facebook’s ruthless commerciality. There is a big difference between a simplistic “Facebook produces disinformation because it allows people to post misleading or heavily subjective content on there” and “Facebook’s entire business is to exploit the emotional distress we experience as a result of the culture of late capitalism, by providing a stream of emotionally salient content.” In the first argument, Facebook *is* the post-factual; in the second, it exploits it for commercial gain — hardly much better, but fundamentally different.

Recall from Chapter Four that Facebook's business model is to exploit our unhappiness and our desperation to "fill the void." Beyond issues of public perception, they have no incentive to change their platforms unless it helps them carry out their own business more effectively. Here, we return to the central themes of this book. Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks are no more interested in building a better public sphere or fighting the post-factual trend than they are in helping to fight social media addiction or improving privacy: Not at all. The rapid spread of highly affective yet inaccurate information is as important to Facebook's business model as "food porn" or selfies.