

The Ethical Dilemma of Social Media

Jeffrey Morrow

PHIL 301

June 9, 2021

Executive Summary

The internet is by far one of the most, if not the greatest, achievement of humanity. We have never been more connected than ever before. But is that a positive or a negative? Social media is a byproduct of the internet age that has gripped humans by their subconscious. Using predictive algorithms, social media companies have been able to grab our attention and keep it and in turn, create a profit. The question posed in this paper is: is it ethical for social media companies to use artificial intelligence to predict user's behavior and exploit that data to make a profit or suppress free speech? I feel that it is completely unethical to continue to exploit users despite glaring health concerns. I also feel it is unethical for a company to censor users posts, no matter what is posted.

What is Social Media, How Does it Affect Us?

History of Social Media

Social media can technically be dated back to the mid eighteenth hundreds. In 1838 Samuel Morse sent the first signal on a telegraph wire over a distance of two miles in Morristown, New Jersey (McNamara, 2019). We have come an extraordinarily long way since then in technology and the use of social media. In 1985 America Online (AOL) went online and quickly became the biggest name on the internet as a web portal, e-mail client, instant messaging and browser (*AOL - Wikipedia*, n.d.). In those days of the internet, the instant messenger was extremely popular because it allowed you to send a message to your friends or a business colleague in a blink of an eye. Later a couple more names came on to the scene like Myspace, Facebook, LinkedIn and many more.

Social Medias Effect on Individuals

Today social media has become a large part of many peoples lives. For example, the social media platform, Snapchat, is used by 73% of adults, 69% use Facebook, YouTube is used by 73% of U.S. adults, and 75% use Instagram. Today 72% of U.S. adults use some form of social media (Maryville University, n.d.). By 2017, despite the age restriction placed on these social media platforms, 5.7 million children under the age of 11 had social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat (Netsanity, 2017).

Given that social media is so prevalent in our lives, why is it an issue? Social media is unhealthy in the way we use it today. A research article titled *Face it, don't Facebook it: Impacts of Social Media Addiction on Mindfulness, Coping Strategies and the Consequence on Emotional Exhaustion* written by Kanokporn Sriwilai and Peerayuth Charoensukmongkol of the International College, National Institute of Development Administration revealed that social media causes a depreciation of peoples mindfulness of the world around them including the tasks they are performing, and the negative effect social media has on peoples coping mechanisms. Mindfulness is described in *Face it, don't Facebook it* as “bring[ing] one’s complete attention to the experiences occurring in the present moment, in a non-judgmental or accepting way”. The research showed a linkage between the lowering of one’s mindfulness and their social media use.

Coping with stressful situations as also been affected by social media according to this research paper. The two coping strategies identified in the paper were problem-focused and emotional-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves taking action to attempt to solve the problem at hand while emotional-focus involves reducing or eliminating the emotional distress connected to the problem. Problem-focused coping has been found to be the most effective way to cope with stress as it causes a person to directly deal with the issue so the stress goes away,

whereas emotional-focused coping is more of a temporary fix, diverting one's attention temporarily to alleviate the stress. Ultimately, the stress comes back when using emotional-focused coping. Social media has been found to be used as an emotional-focused technique of coping with stress. People who are addicted to social media tend to automatically go to social media when they become stressed rather than deal with their issues directly (Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016).

Children's health is especially concerning when talking about social media. According to The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, children are susceptible to cyberbullying, internet addiction, sleep deprivation, exposure to pornography, and sexting. At younger ages, children generally do not have the self-control to avoid or meter their social media use. Even if they know the negative effects, they will still use it. Cyberbullying has grown since the popularization of the internet and texting with adolescent kids. According to a study 20 – 40 percent of children have been a victim of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010), which leads to higher suicide rates in children. Internet addiction causes social dysfunction, depression, self-mutilation, substance abuse, obesity, and sleep deprivation (*Concerns Regarding Social Media and Health Issues in Adolescents and Young Adults*, n.d.).

Social Medias Effect on Society

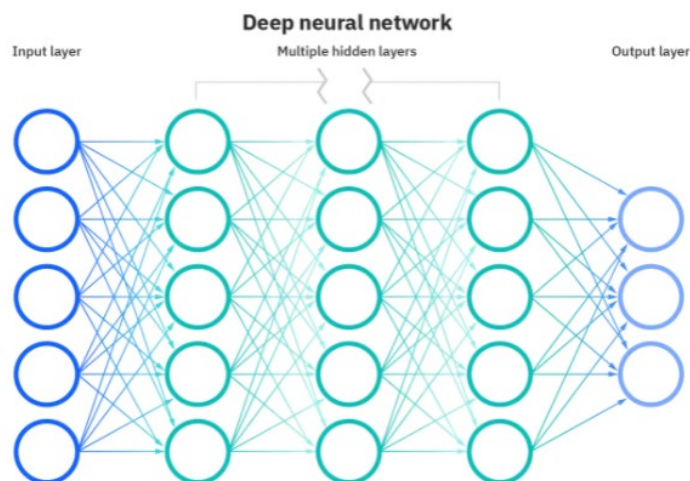
Needless to say, we live in a very polarized world today where tensions are high and nobody seems to agree with each other. This is not the first time Americans have seen this. We saw it in the 50s and the 60s after World War 2 when there was a flurry of new and diverse thought which caused disagreement. However, we have never seen it in this way involving the technology of social media. A study conducted by various researchers from different universities, titled *Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization*, showed

the effects of polarization on political lines. In the study, twitter users who identified them selves as Democrats and some as Republicans, were surveyed on their political beliefs. After a week they were incentivized to follow a twitter bot that retweeted stories and tweets of an opposing view point to the person following it. At the end of the study, the subjects took a post survey. The study found that the Republican twitter users had even more conservative views after following a liberal twitter bot. The Democrat twitter users had slightly more liberal leanings after taking the post survey (Bail et al., 2018). This study shows that after being exposed to an opposing view point, a person’s viewpoint tends to change. But, when people are stuck in these “echo chambers”, they only see their point of view and avoid seeing the other side. But why aren’t people seeing opposing viewpoints very often?

Artificial Intelligence in Social Media

What is Artificial Intelligence: How does it work?

The reason why people have developed such bad social media habits and why we have been driven so far apart is due to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social media. AI is



defined by IBM as “...a field, which combines computer science and robust datasets, to enable problem-solving.” (IBM Cloud Education, 2020).

Artificial intelligence has a sub field called machine learning; it has a sub field called deep learning. Deep

learning is described as a neural network similar to the human brain. A deep learning neural network is made up of three or more layers of nodes that do computations at each node. The figure below shows a diagram showing how this is structured where, each circle is a node. A deep learning neural net is fed a large data set to train it to identify certain things. This could be a picture of a fire hydrant or a string of text. The unfortunate thing about deep neural networks is that they are essentially black boxes in which we do not know what is happening inside of them. We give them an input and it gives us an output, but we have no idea how it came to its conclusion. The “black box” concept is explained by Dallas Card in *The “black box” metaphor in machine learning* (Card, 2017).

How is it Used in Social Media?

The reason this is concerning is that social media companies use deep learning artificial intelligence to create user behavior profiles on their users. The companies use these profiles to predict what the user wants in order to get them to look at their phone longer. The longer the user looks at their phone, tablet, or computer, the more money the social media company makes by running ads on their platforms. The Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* explains how this works. Social media platforms and internet companies collect people's data. The data collected tells them everything about a person; what their likes and dislikes are; whether they are an introvert or extrovert; what their sexual orientation is. All of this data is used to market to an individual. In the documentary, Sandy Parakilas, former operations manager at Facebook and former product manager at Uber, said, “...all of this data that we're pouring out all the time is being fed into these systems that have almost no human supervision, and that are making better and better and better predictions about what we're gonna do and who we are.” The systems he speaks of are deep learning algorithms that predict our behavior (Orlowski, 2020).

At face value, this doesn't seem all that unethical until we count in what these companies do with the data. In *The Social Dilemma*, they speak about how they use behavior profiles to get us to look at our devices more and more often. The reason they do this, as said above, is to make more money from running ads. A company will bid for their ad to be shown on these social media platforms. The social media companies sell screen time to the advertising company for however long their add is engaged by the user for. Ultimately, the social media company makes money the more a user looks at their phone and the company's application. Combine this marketing tactic with the health implications to adults and children, it becomes a very unethical practice. Social media companies are essentially stunting children's social and emotional growth, and causing sleep deprivation and depression in people of all ages, in order to make money.

With health concerns aside, there are also societal issues as well. In *The Social Dilemma*, Shoshana Zuboff, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School said, "...we can affect real-world behavior and emotions, without ever triggering the user's awareness. They are completely clueless.". More than ever before, people are seeing a massive flood of information and stories that we are unsure whether or not they are true. Our opinions are manipulated by the social media companies to fit a certain perspective by what Shoshana Zuboff said.

What is Being Done?

Social and Legislative Changes

In respect to health concerns, there are many movements happening to convince people to use social media and their phones less. Android phones have "wellbeing" features on them that you can use to meter your time on particular apps, and to reduce screen time. Documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* are being made to raise awareness about this epidemic. There are devices

being made like the Light Phone that is functional and simplistic. Light Phone commits itself to be unintrusive in the user's life. From their information page they say, "Light creates tools that respect you. Objects that empower you to be your best self. Technology intentionally designed to be used as little as possible. Things that serve you, not the other way around." (lightphone, n.d.).

In regard to societal issues, in the past several years, social media companies have been compelled to do something about the manipulation of public opinion. Currently, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, protects social media companies from legal action over the actions of their users. Now, that legislation is under bipartisan scrutiny since the riot in Washington DC on January 6th and even leading up to that event. Law makers are calling for social media companies to take responsibility for the fake news distributed on their platforms (Reardon, 2020). The scary thing about allowing social media websites to censor misinformation is that the public has to trust them to censor fairly and with out bias. In a paper written by the Congressional Research Service, it says "Some have expressed concern that these sites are not doing enough to counter violent or false speech. At the same time, many argue that the platforms are unfairly banning and restricting access to potentially valuable speech." (Brannon, n.d.). This quote reminds me of a news outlet called gnews.org. This news outlet reports on the activity of the Chinese Communist Party. If you attempt to share this web site or any of their articles on Facebook, your post or message is restricted. I believe that to be an unethical practice that would continue to be used. After I tried to share this news outlet with my father, and blocked from doing so, I felt wronged. It was a feeling of helplessness, and betrayal by a company that I was told I should trust.

What about Artificial Intelligence?

Artificial Intelligence is under constant development. It is literally building upon itself due to deep learning. But, other than a few social movements to resist the lure of social media caused by the deep learning algorithms that make it so addictive, nothing is being done to keep us, and most importantly our children from falling prey to the negative effects of social media.

What Should Be Done

Social media companies must be held accountable for essentially creating an unregulated drug that causes serious addiction. To fix this I believe that these companies should not be allowed to run ads on their platforms and to make the platforms only a tool. The issue with this is that companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter would be out of business since their products are free. I believe that these services should begin charging users on a subscription-based method. This will disincentivize people from using it as much and will make these enormous companies' worth what people would be willing to pay for. In order to fix the issue with censorship and the spread of misinformation, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act should be reformed to make it hard for social media companies to de-platform users that don't deserve it while stopping the spread of misinformation.

Conclusion

We live in an uncertain time and there is no telling what may come next. Will social media and these deep learning algorithms continue to damage new generations? Or will we learn to overcome these obstacles and learn to live with this technology? Ultimately, it is the ethical responsibility of social media companies to consider what their platforms are doing to the next generation and those that precede it.

References

- AOL - Wikipedia*. (n.d.). Retrieved June 9, 2021, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AOL>
- Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. B. F., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *115*(37), 9216–9221. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>
- Brannon, V. C. (n.d.). *Free Speech and the Regulation of Social Media Content*. 46.
- Card, D. (2017, July 5). *The “black box” metaphor in machine learning | by Dallas Card | Towards Data Science*. The “Black Box” Metaphor in Machine Learning. <https://towardsdatascience.com/the-black-box-metaphor-in-machine-learning-4e57a3a1d2b0?gi=a433a9608943>
- Concerns Regarding Social Media and Health Issues in Adolescents and Young Adults*. (n.d.). 653, 4.
- IBM Cloud Education. (2020, June 3). *What is Artificial Intelligence (AI)? | IBM*. Artificial Intelligence (AI). <https://www.ibm.com/cloud/learn/what-is-artificial-intelligence>
- lightphone. (n.d.). *The Light Phone*. Retrieved June 10, 2021, from <https://www.thelightphone.com/about-us>
- Maryville University. (n.d.). *The Evolution of Social Media: How Did It Begin and Where Could It Go Next?* Retrieved June 9, 2021, from <https://online.maryville.edu/blog/evolution-social-media/>
- McNamara, R. (2019, March 24). *The History of the Invention of the Telegraph*. <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-invention-of-the-telegraph-1773842>
- Netsanity. (2017, September 1). *The Dangers for Children on Social Media*. <https://netsanity.net/dangers-children-social-media-shocking/>

Orlowski, J. (2020, September 9). *The Social Dilemma*. Netflix.

Reardon. (2020, May 31). *What's Section 230? The social media law is in the crosshairs of Congress—CNET*. <https://www.cnet.com/news/whats-section-230-the-social-media-law-is-in-the-crosshairs-of-congress/>

Sriwilai, K., & Charoensukmongkol, P. (2016). Face it, don't Facebook it: Impacts of Social Media Addiction on Mindfulness, Coping Strategies and the Consequence on Emotional Exhaustion. *Stress and Health, 32*(4), 427–434. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2637>

Tokunaga, R. S. (2010). Following you home from school: A critical review and synthesis of research on cyberbullying victimization. *Computers in Human Behavior, 26*(3), 277–287. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.11.014>