Attention Merchants, Persuasive Technologies and Surveillance Capitalism

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Introduction

- You may now understand my remarks in the first lecture: In the age of distraction or attention-grabbing, truth is "whatever makes you click" (Wijnberg, 2020) or whatever you allow to be pushed at you. In the age of inflamed grievances, truth is whatever you are predisposed and inflamed to click, and the solicited notifications that rile your biases.

- It is clear that all media are attention merchants, but there may be more sinister things going on with information technologies and apps

- Given information overload and political complexity, it is seductive to seek simple solutions to complex problems and that is what authoritarians want you to think. It is the message of foreign actors (Russia, China), clickbait entrepreneurs (who do not give a damn about the cause and they will play both sides to make money), and alt-right disinformation activists (alt-right media who think their view is the only view: democracy is a sham to be overthrown by the superior people, them or people who represent them).

- As much as frightening it is for the alt-right to addict its disinformation adherents to their created or inflamed moral outrage, there is another subversion of human choice by the attention merchants of Silicon Valley.

Introduction

- At a time when we desperately need to enhance everyone's critical thinking abilities, we are lulled into a false sense of smartness: our smartphone is making us dumber, because it tends to destroy thoughtful questions and thoughtful responses with reliance on glib, quick answers and ongoing distractions. Thought is replaced by reaction and distraction.
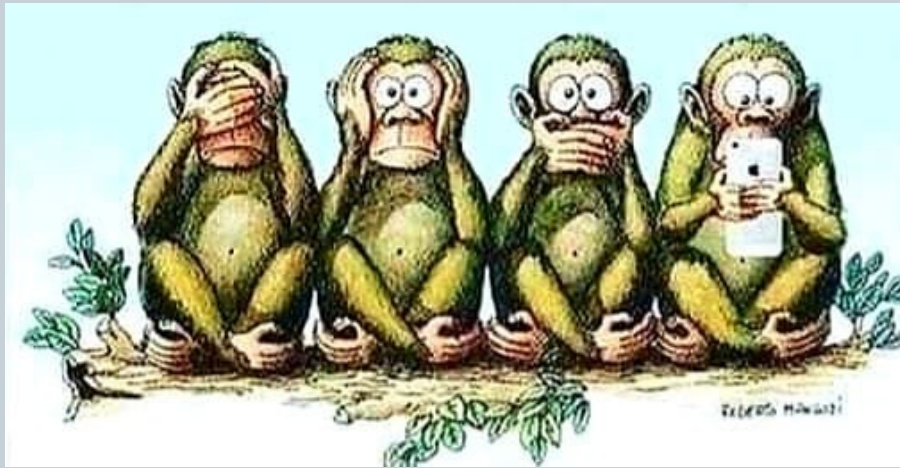
- The manufacturers have made their use more and more addictive, such that we now have a word that shows the power of such addiction: *nomophobia*, a phobia of being out of contact of one's cell phone (no-mobile-phone phobia), whether because of loss of power or loss of signal. There may be underlying causes, to be sure, which are stoked by the manufacturers: such as "social *phobia* or social anxiety disorder, social anxiety, and panic disorder."
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nomophobia

Technology is an Issue

- There were many who anticipated that the nirvana of computer technologies was not what it was cracked up to be: Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do*, Neil Postman's *Technopoly: Amusing Ourselves to Death*, to name a few.

- Sherry Turkle in the early 2000s was the first to alert us not only to the benefits of information technologies such as smartphones and their apps but also their problems. In her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,* (2011) she shows how one (especially teenagers) becomes more and more addicted to one's smartphones, that we become "tethered" to them

- By relying on the technology, users detach themselves from daily life. Connectivity with others is less through verbal interactions (dialog) become less and less. Just a look around the world and see people spending most of their time on "using" cell phones rather communicating with other people who might sit next to them. In all meetings, classes, shopping at lunch, they stare at the phone checking email, texting, or using Facebook or some other app.

- In a TED talk, *Connected But Alone,* Turkle makes some salient observations:

  When I ask people "What's wrong with having a conversation?" People say, "I'll tell you what's wrong with having a conversation. It takes place in real time and you can't control what you're going to say." So that's the bottom line. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body -- not too little, not too much, just right.

   https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_connected_but_alone/transcript?language=en, 06:14

Turkle: *Connected but Alone*

And I believe it's because technology appeals to us most where we are most vulnerable. And we are vulnerable. We're lonely, but we're afraid of intimacy. And so from social networks to sociable robots, we're designing technologies that will give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship….(11:59)

These days, those phones in our pockets are changing our minds and hearts because they offer us three gratifying fantasies. One, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; two, that we will always be heard; and three, that we will never have to be alone. And that third idea, that we will never have to be alone, is central to changing our psyches. Because the moment that people are alone, even for a few seconds, they become anxious, they panic, they fidget, they reach for a device. Just think of people at a checkout line or at a red light. Being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved. And so people try to solve it by connecting. (12:33)

The best way to describe it is, I share therefore I am. We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings even as we're having them. So before it was: I have a feeling, I want to make a call. Now it's: I want to have a feeling, I need to send a text. The problem with this new regime of "I share therefore I am" is that, if we don't have connection, we don't feel like ourselves. We almost don't feel ourselves. So what do we do? We connect more and more. But in the process, we set ourselves up to be isolated. (13:39)

How do you get from connection to isolation? You end up isolated if you don't cultivate the capacity for solitude, the ability to be separate, to gather yourself. Solitude is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments. When we don't have the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people in order to feel less anxious or in order to feel alive. When this happens, we're not able to appreciate who they are. It's as though we're using them as spare parts to support our fragile sense of self. We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us feel less alone. But we're at risk, because actually it's the opposite that's true. If we're not able to be alone, we're going to be more lonely. And if we don't teach our children to be alone, they're only going to know how to be lonely. (14:41)

Just think how this loneliness can be turned in a legion of the unhappy and disenfranchised, looking for meaning in the group think of an authoritarian state.

Persuasive Technologies

- Sherry Turkle set the stage for understanding how this tethering leads to user manipulation. One of the techniques is profiling.

- Wonderful insight about this topic is found in Netflix's documentary, *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020). The following observations summarize some of its themes.

- Profiling. It should be no surprise the Silicon Valley tech companies, primarily Facebook, Apple and Google, can and do keep track of everything that anyone does online – what sites one visits and for how long, what images one looks at and for how long, what things one buys or are interested in, what friends one has, what "likes" (or its variations) one posts, who one phototags or is phototagged by, what engagement one has with what sites, how one navigates through a site, how long one stays on pages or subpages, what interactions one engages in, such as posting a comment, giving one's email address, engaging in a poll, clicking through links, etc. (all of these are known as engagements).

- These are all fed into a profile that slowly builds over time, never disappears, and is continuously updated and refined. It is like taking every news story and changing it for where and who one is reading it, making the content of a news entry vary for each and every person.

Attention Merchants

- Profiling will not only predict one's behavior but also it will slowly begin to control one's behavior through psychological mechanisms.

- The purpose of attention merchants is not only to engage one's attention but also to promote addiction to technologies, sites and apps.

- For the surveillance capitalists, there are three goals: the engagement goal (keep the person engaged and wanting to return to a site), the growth goal (get the users to get others to join), and the advertising goal (to market and sell products) (Orlowski, 2020).

- These goals are driven by the desire to make money by attracting one's attention (which makes money from advertisers) or attracting one's consumption of products, goods and services.

- The problem is that there are no constraints on attention-grabbing or money-making, despite its many damaging effects, such as adolescents cutting themselves or committing suicide for a lack of getting enough "likes" in Facebook and other apps.

- The smartphone is really a make-dumb phone. While for some issues, some insight can be gleaned through internet resources. But generally, it is a vehicle for distraction. While I might find out what actors were in *Gone with the Wind* (providing "facts" in a few keystrokes), how does help in deciding how to construct a meaningful life? Rather than promoting critical, long-range thinking – it provides uncritical thinking and a series of meaningless moments. It facilitates the squandering of one's attention.

- "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." Pablo Picasso. Reflecting on the observations of Sherry Turkle, does the smartphone help you in finding your gift, but distract you from finding it? Or does it even avoid asking the question as you shop for more bargains at Amazon?

Uncontrolled Manipulation and Addiction Of Consumers

- *The Social Dilemma* ironically notes that even the people who developed the addicting software fell prey to the software, even knowing what was behind it.

- To one, the addiction was Twitter, to another email, to another Facebook.

- The addiction is based on positive intermittent reinforcement (adding a reward, such as financial gain, in order to invoke a response).

- Like a gambling addict at a slot machine, when the last lever pull of the "one-arm bandit" did not succeed in a winning row, it entices the next lever pull by occasionally offering a win.

- Human vulnerabilities in psychology are exploited for monetary advantage, without regard to harmful effects.

- For example, every time you binge-watch a movie on Netflix or Amazon Prime (itself possibly an addiction), you are offered the reward of another movie similar to the one just seen so that one can binge on binge-watching.

- In a similar manner those addicted to right-wing (usually) "tribal partisan pornography" willingly go down the rabbit-hole of moral outrage to get another serotonin fix of smug self-righteousness and more moral rage.

Adverse Effects of Social Media on Teenagers

According to the Newport Academy, a rehabilitation center for adolescents and their families struggling with mental health issues, eating disorders, and substance abuse, *The Social Dilemma* provides four adverse effects of social media on teenagers:

(1) persuasive technology – their generated profiles leads "to persuade them to keep scrolling longer, so they will view more ads, invite more friends, and generate more money for the platforms and their advertisers";

(2) fake popularity – teenagers place great value on such short-term rewards as hearts, likes, "thumbs up," but when they don't get them, they feel "even more vacant and empty" than before, citing Chamath Palihapitiya, Facebook's former VP of growth, in the film;

(3) snapshot dysmorphia -- teenagers, especially girls, develop poor body images, as a result of the unrealistic standards for beauty depicted in social media, which may lead to cutting themselves or suicide; and

(4) digital pacifier – there is growing evidence that teenagers (and adults) "have lost the ability to calm and soothe themselves with real-world reflection, activities, and relationships. Instead, they deal with challenging emotions by turning to social media for distraction and entertainment" (Monroe, 2020).

Age of Surveillance Capitalism

The notion of the "Age of Surveillance Capitalism" was articulated and developed by Shoshana Zuboff, the Charles Edward Wilson Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*

- She believes that human beings' experiences are commodities that are and will be manipulated by international tech companies for exploitation and profit, overthrowing democracy. It is a bleak portrait but given the current trends in psychological manipulation with no impetus to stop it, it does represent a possible and frightening future, where the whole world becomes inhabitants of Plato's Cave.

- Many unresearched adverse effects of social media and digital technologies are thrown upon the world because it makes money without concern about the long-range, not to mention the immediate impact, of those technologies.

- Particularly worrisome is the impact on ethical, political and human behavior

Attempts to Control Persuasive Technologies

- Tristan Harris and other tech industry experts that were involved in various tech companies, and have come to realize the dangers of persuasive technologies.

- He was one of the co-founders for the Center for Humane Technology, which is "dedicated to radically reimagining our digital infrastructure. Our mission is to drive a comprehensive shift toward humane technology that supports our well-being, democracy, and shared information environment."
https://www.humanetech.com/who-we-are#our-story

- It is easy to see some of the themes that concern him and his organization in his presentations:
  - **2013 |** Tristan Harris releases viral presentation at Google, **A Call to Minimize Distraction & Respect Users' Attention**
  - **2017 | 60 Minutes features** Tristan Harris and Anderson Cooper on Silicon Valley's "brain hacking" and illusion of neutrality
  - **2017 |** TED Talk: **How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day**
  - **2018 | NPR "What is the cost of Infinite Distraction?"**

As noted at the beginning, we can roughly divide political information seekers into:

(a) those the live in a closed propaganda feedback loop or filter bubble who are nurtured and enslaved in their self-righteous anger, resentments or grievances (succumbing to their confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias and other cognitive biases). We might also include those enslaved to their persuasive technologies, who cannot muster the will to turn off their phone or retreat from the seductive engagements that promote a meaningless measure of self-worth (e.g., how many 'likes' or hearts we get).

(b) those who are open to learning how to find reliable information, to sort out disinformation and misinformation from verified and verifiable information on a particular political issue (trying to cope with the cognitive biases)

To try to respond to disinformation seekers, one could undertake the roles that Socrates undertook in many of Plato's dialogs. If one just adamantly rejected the position of tribal partisan adherent, there would be an immediate rebuff (my opinion is as good as yours), leading to a further entrenchment in the given position. Rather than using direct confrontation, we can learn from Plato about how to get people to possibly change their minds.

In the Platonic/Socratic view of true learning, there are two aspects of the Socratic method of education.

(1) Benumbing or shocking the information seeker. In various Platonic dialogues, Socrates referred to as a stingray, electric eel or gadfly, shocking or benumbing his interlocutors into an awareness of their ignorance about a topic about which they think they possess knowledge (as Meno in the *Meno* believes he understands what virtue is all about). One ask questions of the information seeker, to let them see problems with their query (shocking them into an awareness of their ignorance) or to lead them to more reasonable sources. The purpose of this shock in the first aspect of the Socratic method is to clear away what one unidentified commentator referred to as "the conceit of false knowledge."

(2) Midwifery of ideas. In the second aspect, Socrates plays a midwife – using questions skillfully to have his interlocutors come to a self-realization of their true condition, guiding them to the birth of their ideas, leading them to insights about how the position may be improved or challenged. The important thing is that there is a process of self-discovery, not regurgitating the thoughts of others (e.g. Newsmax)

Socratic Approach

Depending on how deeply a patron is involved in the "closed propaganda feedback loop," one may be happy to achieve a state of benumbing the interlocuter into some awareness of their ignorance, that they can find no grounds for holding their position.

Three techniques may be helpful:

(1) Ask the disinformation adherent to articulate their position. If they find it difficult to explain the position that they hold, they may realize for themselves that there are flaws in their views. E.g., why do you think all Democrats are socialists or Social Security is not socialistic?

(2) Ask the patron to explain the position to which they object. E.g., what do you think a liberal stands for? In a similar manner, the patron may realize that they have created a caricature or straw man of their opponents, rather than real persons.

If the misinformation adherent is not so enveloped in their own anger, biases and resentments, one may be able to achieve more. Acting like a midwife using leading questions, one may get them to modify their position.

(3) Choose a topic to discuss that is not emotionally loaded, and about which one could have an agreement: e.g., Do you agree that large corporations should pay their fair share of taxes? How do you think we should manage this?

The problem is that so many of the people in the closed propaganda may temporarily be awakened, but the ecology is so strong and seductive, they are likely to be engulfed and overwhelmed by it. Not only that – they are likely to scream at you if your conversation does agree with the talking points of right-wing ideology. We need more information and health professionals and school boards to stand up against the threats of the uneducated, the biased, the ignorant or politically craven and addicted.