



## Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy

Author \_ Siva Vaidhyathan

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Reviewer \_ Sarah Noel Probst, member services coordinator at ConnectNY, an academic library consortium in New York

Social media, and Facebook in particular, have become such a ubiquitous and deeply imbedded part of culture that few would bother to mark their existence with more than a casual shrug. People use social media to fulfill all manner of tasks, needs, and desires, while businesses and organizations use it to reach increasingly specific segments of the population. Engaging with social media is a foregone conclusion—a swift glance around any coffee shop, university, classroom, restaurant, or nearly any other public setting is enough to validate this. In the realm of social media, Facebook is king. The platform can now boast of well over 2 billion international users that post, upload pictures and video, and interact with it hundreds of thousands of times a day. At a surface level, Facebook appears to ask nothing of people except their time, but a deeper dive into the world of likes, clicks, and shares unveils a riptide of surveillance, manipulation, disinformation, and digital imperialism. In *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, Siva Vaidhyathan takes a floodlight to the very roots of the platform and demonstrates with careful, piercing analysis how it has eroded one of the hallmarks of a democracy: the ability of the public to have reasoned, informed discourse.

Vaidhyathan approaches the exploration of Facebook's intrinsic issues as a historian. The book is divided into seven chapters, each providing a detailed look at a function of Facebook and the twentieth-century intellectual underpinnings that influenced the function's inclusion or promotion within the platform. The author acknowledges from the start his own wide-ranging use of both Facebook and social media at large. Rather than calling into question the validity and sincerity of presented arguments, this frank admission identifies Vaidhyathan as a

voice of reason operating within the same social framework as billions.

Chapter 1, "The Pleasure Machine," in conjunction with chapter 3, "The Attention Machine," lays out how Facebook perpetuates its value among users by providing for the cheap maintenance of long-distance relationships, engagement in causes, participation in groups, acquisition of new "Friends," playing games, and much more. These chapters illuminate an inherent part of Facebook's nature that is not unlike a Las Vegas slot machine—it provides a constant supply of low-level feedback, both good and bad, that entices the user to return time and time again in the hope of receiving a reward. Vaidhyathan advises that while the relative personal rewards of Facebook are high and, generally, the harms to the individual low, this overall manipulative cycle is damaging to larger society and to the ability to process new knowledge with any significant amount of interaction or thought.

Chapter 2, "The Surveillance Machine," is easily one of the most chilling chapters in the entire work. As previously mentioned, one of the main functions of Facebook is the ability of users to post information, photographs, and videos about themselves and others; this is both intrinsic to the service and has the demonstrated potential to be insidious. Vaidhyathan breaks down in great detail the ways in which the personal information hoarded by the platform is used by commercial entities, governments, and other users to form a network of near-constant surveillance that can tarnish reputations and destroy lives.

Chapter 4, "The Benevolence Machine," examines the rise of the ideology of corporate social responsibility/social entrepreneurship at large, how it has been utilized by Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook to engender goodwill



among its users and shareholders, and how this belief in corporate social goodness invites both disaster and the pomposity of self-righteousness. The author explores the apolitical language used by Zuckerberg in describing the negative aspects of Facebook while simultaneously dismissing them as design flaws to be fixed in the next update.

The last three chapters in the book clarify Facebook's role in politics, uprisings, and protests. The lack of transparency and accountability for political ads displayed to narrow sections of the population is addressed at length, as is the platform's use and complicity in disseminating extreme propaganda from dictators and their supporters around the globe. These chapters also discuss the election of Donald Trump in America and Brexit in the United Kingdom, offering deep insight into the pre-existing environments and social unrest that Facebook's algorithms expertly exploited to the satisfaction of both campaigns.

Anyone concerned about the ways Facebook uses the data it collects and the effects social media has had on society at large will be well served by reading this book. Those interested in examining the rise of Facebook and similar services from a historical perspective will likewise benefit from Vaidhyanathan's critical analysis of the twentieth-century ideologies that paved the way for current platforms. Many already harbor concerns about the lack of civil discourse in the public sphere and search for ways to correct this; while Vaidhyanathan does not provide a precise roadmap to bringing back reasoned

discussion, those in search of answers will find comfort and hope in the author's recommendations for the future.

Despite the dire nature of the topic, Vaidhyanathan's prose is a pleasure to read; the eloquence of *Anti-Social Media* lies in the careful balance struck between straightforward language and demonstrated depth of thought and research. Unencumbered by superfluous jargon, the author's style is a successful combination of astute observer and teacher. *Anti-Social Media* is not a manifesto encouraging readers to disembark Facebook en masse; rather, it is a call to seriously consider the impact of social media on the human experience and what steps may be taken not by Facebook or any other for-profit enterprise, but by the general public, to reclaim what has been stripped from society. Vaidhyanathan acknowledges that the path forward to meaningful discussion and careful deliberation will be long one, but that there are indeed means to correct the current course should the effort be put in to doing so. This book is predicated on the notion that a majority of people want to be informed and active participants in their own lives, but empowering people to fully participate in their existence and governance is a topic for another work. What the author does offer is a wealth of food for thought and the room for each reader to deliberate on how to possibly wrest their lives from the machinations of organizations that give lip-service to justice and equality while successfully chipping away at the most basic and essential freedoms.

## Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech

**Author \_ Keith E. Whittington**

**Publisher \_ Princeton University Press, 2018. 216p. Cloth (also available as an e-book)**

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**Reviewer \_ Kristi H. Jerome, Graduate student, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alabama**

There has been a rise in recent discussions about the purpose of higher education. Due to rising costs, political turmoil, and a perceived overabundance of censoring conservative voices, many are questioning whether universities are just bastions of left-leaning, socialist schools of thought. In his book *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*, Keith E. Whittington, a constitutional law professor from Princeton University with a background in history, uses history, constitutional law, and philosophy to show how foundational free speech and intellectual freedom are to the American university system. These principles allow for the exchange of ideas in an environment meant to educate and promote intellectual

thought. Whittington writes that universities have a mission to "produce and disseminate knowledge." In order to accomplish those goals, students and faculty must be able to listen and freely discuss different forms of thought and expression in order to substantiate, strengthen, change, or produce knowledge.

Whittington sets the stage for his treatise with a narrative of a student protest at the University of California, Berkeley. The way it is written, the reader could easily assume the author is alluding to the recent 2017 protests that erupted into violence. However, Whittington is really referring to a historical event that occurred in 1903 when Carrie Nation was invited to speak. He believes that even