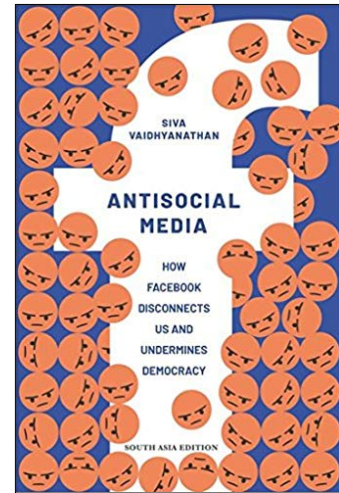


Siva Vaidhyanathan, **Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 288 pp., \$24.95 (hardcover), \$17.95 (paperback).

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In ***Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy***, the author, Siva Vaidhyanathan, is pessimistic about the effects of Facebook and social media. He argues that Facebook benefits individual users but is detrimental to society as a whole. Facebook may help family and relationships by keeping users abreast of news and information. Facebook may also spur political engagement even though it alienates people with opposing views. It causes “pollution” and can be weaponized in ways that divide society rather than bring people together as its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, promised. Facebook has become an ecology of noise that drives people to opposite ends of the opinion spectrum on political, racial, economic, and information issues. The middle ground vanishes. Facebook only disseminates low-level information and returns mediocre feedback that produces mediocre content and feedback for others. Administrators exert limited control over the accuracy of that content and information. The author frequently paints Facebook’s effects on society in a negative light.



The author shows how the dominance of Facebook and Google raises important concerns. He compares the power that these two companies wield to the East India Trading Company at its zenith at the beginning of the 19th century. Indeed, Facebook and Google officials wield more power than many governments, and oversight barely curtails their power. These two organizations are a de facto “technopoly” (p. 211). Even if their flaws are apparent, there are few alternatives available.

The author also argues that the entertainment offered by Facebook is not especially entertaining. It mainly offers entertainment that is easy and mindless, good for spending a few hours a day on to while away the time. Users rarely experience real highs or lows when using Facebook; they simply coast on the small pleasures that it brings when users access it. In short, *Antisocial Media* contends that Facebook segregates people instead of connecting them. Users want to experience validation and pleasure, so they automatically follow and befriend individuals and pages that are aligned with their own beliefs while either bashing or ignoring others that do not share their ideals. This creates a circle of distrust, where individuals only hear the voices of those who agree with them and portray opposing views combatively. Some users also intentionally broadcast misinformation that is designed to mislead others. Yet those actions are often the ones that receive the most response from social media users, which leads to the author’s core theme.

Garnering attention is the idea around which social media revolves. *Antisocial Media* brings up the positive example of the “Ice Bucket Challenge”—the viral campaign that raised more than \$98.2 million for research for the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Foundation. Still, the author argues that this campaign

illustrates the fickleness of users and how the system is perverted to give the loudest entities the most attention. Even though there are many causes that are arguably equally deserving of attention and resources, the ALS Foundation got immense public attention because its campaign went viral. This was not an isolated incident, nor was it specific to social media. The idea of the "attention economy" (p. 81) emerged in the late 1990s as the Internet took off. Then, providers of services like videos understood that their power to influence came directly from capturing the attention of a greater number of users than their competitors. This positively impacted users because content creators made their content free in order to capture attention. Social media makes it possible for every user to be a content creator, thus increasing the competition level for all users. Meanwhile, as competition occurs on social media platforms, Facebook and other social media sites achieved a practical monopoly on online advertising, along with access to massive amounts of usage information and data. This access gives these firms and bad actors the ability to make nefarious, invasive attacks on user privacy and to set up intrusive surveillance.

Surveillance, a central theme of *Antisocial Media*, sparked significant scrutiny of Facebook. Facebook initially sidestepped responsibility on the invasion of its users' privacy and as an enabler that allowed users to act out their worst impulses with little fear of repercussions. Cases where blame fell on Facebook included the Cambridge Analytica data leaks (Granville, 2018) and the Marine nude photo scandal (Gibbons-Neff, 2017). There are clear business and political benefits derived from using the data that Facebook gathered. Recently, the misuse of this data also caused major turmoil, especially in the case of Russia and the Trump campaign (Crowley, 2017). The author stresses that although Zuckerberg's vision to connect people and to use analytics to tailor the world to individual needs is a good one, Facebook's growth has caused it to lose any semblance of control.

The author catalogs Facebook's flaws, but his overall conclusion is flawed. He incessantly criticizes Facebook, but he absolves others of blame. Facebook is, first and foremost, a communication tool. It helps people connect and share information as have so many other communication pathways. Before the rise of the Internet and social media, hate speech and propaganda flourished; Facebook simply gave those weapons a larger platform. Sadly, the author's assertions are predominantly one-sided, rarely touching on the positive effects of social media. Today, information is readily available and easily accessible. Facebook can propagate false information, but it also makes it easier to verify whether the information one receives is accurate. Yes, everybody is constantly pummeled by scammers. But Googling the supposed scammer or phishing effort immediately reveals its legitimacy or illegitimacy.

The author's concluding assertion is that global political reform is necessary to spread better knowledge about the effects of social media and to prompt better corporate and government policies. This sounds good in theory, but the argument is simplistic and unrealistic. To create change on an international scale is a huge challenge and is only possible if Facebook and other major firms cooperate, which is unlikely in the extreme. In addition, better knowledge of the system invites more manipulation from individuals and firms with different agendas while simultaneously strengthening people's resistance to reform through such channels. This would reinforce societal divisions. The author suggests that only government can bring about the needed reforms but acknowledges that recent U.S. political developments do not bode well for quick action, because the 2016 presidential election was so intertwined with the mass manipulation that the author seeks to curtail.

*Antisocial Media* is well written and thought provoking. It will appeal especially to modern Internet users who are nervous about social media and eager to better understand the inner workings of the system. Although his observations are skewed and he uses assertions of harm more than evidence, this volume will likely spur readers to question their assumption about huge techno firms. That is precisely what the author was aiming for in his effort to educate users and bring about reform.

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