

NOVEMBER 2020

Election 2020: Technology, Democracy, and the Path Forward

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THE COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY is abundantly clear in the wake of the 2020 election. When tech companies proudly aspire to disrupt the conventional way of doing business in the marketplace, we can celebrate innovation and competition. But what happens when the same efforts disrupt democracy itself? Our task then is to examine questions about the business models of social media companies, technology policy, and the relationship between technological disruption and democratic rights.

The eight-week Stanford University course, “Technology and the 2020 Election: How Silicon Valley Technologies Affect Elections and Shape Democracy,” explored this issue among others. A joint class for Stanford students and Stanford’s Continuing Studies Community, the course enrolls a cross-generational population of more than 400 students from around the world.

The Nov. 11 final class session on “Technology and Democracy” featured guest experts [Roger McNamee](#), a technology entrepreneur and author of “Zucked: Waking up to the Facebook Catastrophe,” and [Shoshana Zuboff](#), author of “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power,” and professor emerita at Harvard University.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The ongoing privatization of governance in the digital world is impinging upon the cornerstones of liberal democracy, the public interest and universal human rights.
- Due to the lack of access to the inner mechanisms of social media algorithms and business models, we have a less informed public debate on these issues and lack the evidence for substantive policymaking.
- Instead of donning our Silicon Valley engineering mindsets – thinking as problem-solvers, users or consumers – it is more productive to think of ourselves as democratic citizens in a great experiment that is unfolding.

Introduction

Prior class discussions highlighted the role of social media platforms and how political ads can micro-target people on the basis of detailed information gathered about them. These practices pose perils to privacy, civil discourse, and freedom of choice – all pillars of a healthy democracy. Regard for truth and fact, trust in expertise, and the possibility of common knowledge can suffer when people connect online and are sorted into algorithmically constituted filter bubbles, or when tech companies suggest recommended friends, content and groups to users – sometimes sharing hateful agendas in the process. These actions fit their standard business model of profit-making via engagement and digital ad revenue.

Various tech giants and governments treat mis- and disinformation differently, depending on whether it is domestic or foreign in origin. Lies spread about COVID-19 during the pandemic has resulted in the actual loss of life. Yet American social media companies are insulated from accountability and legal liability for the content they host because of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. They have also dogmatically pointed to the First Amendment to avoid accountability for their lack of liability and responsible behavior.

This class also explored bottom-up civil rights activism as well as the tech platforms' series of sudden and late-in-the game changes regarding viral disinformation as the U.S. approached the election. It's too early to give

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the tech giants a scorecard in the 2020 election, despite their self-affirmative judgments to date.

We do know that leading up to the election, Spanish-speaking voters were massively targeted on social media, following a pattern of targeting of minorities amid a continual sowing of division and polarization on such fronts. Today, President Trump continues to falsely claim via social media that the election was stolen.

Some traction exists on possible privacy and anti-trust legislation as ways to better protect the rights of people and to strengthen democracy itself. History explains why Europeans are more sensitive about protecting people's data from abuse by both governments and corporations. Under both the Nazi and the Soviet

ELECTION 2020: TECHNOLOGY, DEMOCRACY, AND THE PATH FORWARD

regimes, state intelligence services used census data and spying on citizens to repress and control. With all the focus on the United States, the extent of U.S.-based social media impact elsewhere in the world remains overshadowed, while the most far reaching harms can be witnessed in countries with ethnic- or election-related violence.

Core challenges to independent research and oversight remain – such as the lack of transparency, lack of access to information for researchers and lawmakers, and accountability of the platforms themselves. Due to the lack of access to the inner mechanisms of social media algorithms and business models, we have a less informed public debate on these issues and lack the evidence for substantive policymaking. Another foundational question is where the legitimacy to govern actually resides in the digital world.

In “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,” Shoshana Zuboff writes, *“Two men at Google who do not enjoy the legitimacy of the vote, democratic oversight, or the demands of shareholder governance exercise control over the organization and presentation of the world’s information. One man at Facebook who does not enjoy the legitimacy of the vote, democratic oversight, or the demands of shareholder governance exercises control over an increasingly universal means of social connection along with the information concealed in its networks.”*

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Discussion

The large social media firms operate with a specific economic logic – in other words, with their own rules, economic imperatives, and competitive dynamics that further their own interests. In both the 2016 and 2020 elections, their behavior was consistent with their economic logic and imperatives. The core focus should not be on any technology as such, or about the goodness or badness of the CEOs. The focus must be on the broader political economy that sets in place the basic incentives for corporate decisions in the tech sector.

As the one man in Zuboff’s Facebook example illustrates, social media companies engineer a type of corporate governance in unaccountable ways that assigns them considerable control over the space for informing citizens and democratic processes and deliberations. They are only willing to ratchet down on content in circumstances where they risk profit – because of user withdrawal, loss of ad revenue, or government regulation – while they continue to adopt different rules for Americans than for users in other parts of the world.

Platforms depend on users’ attention to monetize their operations through digital advertising. They can target individually to very precise levels, and thus have an advantage over all prior media in this regard. According to McNamee, their goal is to hold human attention at the most basic level. They achieve this by provoking the innate human instinct for self-preservation – “fight

ELECTION 2020: TECHNOLOGY, DEMOCRACY, AND THE PATH FORWARD

or flight” – through controversial or extreme content distributed to the largest number of people. Social media algorithms are not based on amplifying content that makes us healthy or prosperous, for example, but instead that which triggers our emotional responses.

Facebook receives a trivial amount of revenue from political ads, and in today’s environment, all political campaigns are dependent in using such platforms for advertising and reaching their audiences. McNamee suggests the default mode of these companies is anti-democratic because they themselves are authoritarian in their structure, beliefs and behaviors, and so are attracted to authoritarian political leaders. The concept of “authoritarian” when applied to the large tech firms is arguably defined as single person rule without legitimacy, checks and balances or oversight – not in the conventional political sense.

The early Silicon Valley narrative of a “techno-liberation utopia” for everyone was naïve to begin with and is irresponsible in light of what has emerged. While it’s arguable that such technology has become the ordinary infrastructure of our lives with some benefits – video conferencing allows us to connect during the ongoing pandemic – our task is now not to be utopian or dystopian, but to have a mature conversation about how democratic governments can regulate these companies for the greater societal good.

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proprietary assets, the data are fed into supply chains where they’re manufactured into AI-driven “prediction products” about people. Thus, Facebook sells or trades in “human futures.”

Zuboff said that according to a leaked 2018 memo, Facebook ingests trillions of data points every day and 26 million predictions of human behavior every second into their AI hub. Such “surveillance capitalism” is the act of taking private data and selling it for profit. This creates unprecedented concentrations of a new kind of economic power.

Using this data available in political ways poses threats to democracy in a world where authoritarianism is on the rise. For the first time since 2001, a majority of the world’s countries are operating under a form of autocracy, according to the V-Dem Institute.

ELECTION 2020: TECHNOLOGY, DEMOCRACY, AND THE PATH FORWARD

Originally, capitalism was likened to a garden, as it required fairness, care and feeding, McNamee said. In America, the government historically has been the gardener, setting the rules and enforcing them. But starting in the 1980s, America began experimenting with removing the gardener from the garden. The result was a massive explosion economic growth. But over time, the benefits of that growth accrued to fewer and fewer people. Now, monopolistic economic power is more concentrated than at any time in the past 100 years, and this is especially true in Silicon Valley.

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Final Thoughts

The 2020 election was in many ways not just a referendum on democracy, but one on the American brand of capitalism and technology policy. If we seek to restore democracy, we also need to return to a form of capitalism without monopolistic influences, the type that protects human privacy and does not allow concentrated economic powers to flourish at the expense of the vast majority of people.

When we consider democratic institutions and their actual performances, we might not discover optimal solutions or great efficiencies. We all know that contemporary democratic institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere are beset by polarization and dysfunction. But instead of donning our Silicon Valley engineering mindsets – thinking as problem-solvers, users or consumers – it is more productive to think of ourselves as democratic citizens in a great experiment that is unfolding.

Central to this view is an understanding that democracy was never designed in the first place to optimize some output through government institutions. Rather, democracy is a mechanism for arbitrating issues, and refereeing competing policies and preferences in peaceful, fair, and collaborative ways.

While there's no magic solution for democratic success, there's always adaptations and adjustments that can yield better outcomes. Americans are participating in a centuries-long experiment to nudge their way forward toward a more democratic environment. Every voice and every vote is essential. Without a broadly inclusive engagement by the citizenry, we won't have this experiment well in the future. With it, however, we can build a healthier democracy in the big picture and long run.

ELECTION 2020: TECHNOLOGY, DEMOCRACY, AND THE PATH FORWARD

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The views expressed in this issue brief reflect the views of the authors.



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