



THE REBOOT THAT CAN SAVE SOCIAL MEDIA

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Eric

Welcome to episode one of, *In Reality*, the podcast on power, truth, and media. I'm Eric Schurenberg, a long-time journalist, most recently the CEO of Inc and Fast Company.

Joan

Hi, and I'm Joan Donovan, the Research Director at Harvard Kennedy Shorenstein Center on Media Politics and Public Policy, where I'm also the Director of the Technology and Social Change Project, where we research most broadly the internet, but also disinformation and media manipulation.

Eric

Joan, it is great to be sharing this podcast with you. We're here now on episode number one, a kind of milestone for us. What do you want to accomplish on *In Reality*?

Joan

I think one of the things that I want to accomplish with this podcast series is to bring together in conversation researchers, journalists, technologists, advocates, professionals, public health professionals to think about this moment and think about what kind of technology we are going to need in the future to better serve the public interest. And I'm hoping that while some of the conversations we're going to have with folks are pretty geeky in the sense that we want that ground-eye view of what people are doing to try to thwart the tidal wave of misinformation. I'm also hoping that we can bring much more realistic debate to the fields that seem to be oscillating between, well, should we just shut off the internet entirely, or are there things about it that we can

salvage and kind of redesign and reinvent so that we can support the broadest possible public good.

Eric

That's great, Joan, the work you do at Shorenstein and the technology and social change project is hugely important, and the truth probably has no better advocate than you and your team. Now, for me as a journalist and media executive, I kind of take a tight of misinformation personally, but on a sort of grander scale, I truly believe that democracy can't thrive without a robust, trusted, free press, a responsible tech sector, and a shared sense of truth among, you know, the electorate, our fellow citizens. And at this moment in history, truth needs all the advocates it can get. And so, my goal on, *In Reality is* to elevate that group of people that you just identified, who are fighting to return us to that shared sense of reality. Now, today we'll have one of those truth advocates; in our interview section that the guest is Rob Reich, a professor at Stanford University who's doing some amazing work in philosophy, but before we get there, let's talk about what's going on right now in misinformation and the most visible source of it right now. The most urgent, perhaps, is what's coming out of Ukraine. You know, in any conflict, there's always the fog of war, and each side has its own propaganda aims and will bend the truth to give its side an advantage. But the Russians have been experts at misinformation for a long time and have gone into overdrive with the conflict in Ukraine. One means that has been widely rooted about is the idea that there is a bioweapons lab in Ukraine funded by the US and manned by Ukrainians. Russians are coming in to protect the world from the release of deadly Biogens being developed there. That is untrue and has been debunked quite a bit, but the origins of it and the arc of it as it was disseminated bears a lot of resemblance to the typical misinformation. Joan, you've seen this before.

Joan

Yeah. We study misinformation and media manipulation in a life cycle model, and so we're always trying to look at, okay, where did this rumor get started, who was pushing it originally, who reacted to it right to this like journalists or tech companies, politicians, who's being drawn in by the media manipulation campaign. And then, we look at mitigation, and then adaption, we look at how media manipulators adapt. And so Biolabs are something we've seen before, most notably the beginning of COVID; there was this lab leak theory that was being pushed around this idea that there was a leak in Wuhan, and that led to the massive coronavirus outbreak. Now that story could be true, we don't have a lot of evidence to refute it, but we don't have evidence to support it either, but nevertheless, investigations need to happen. But what was interesting about that is how that narrative of a lab leak got twisted to say that China was actually producing COVID as a bioweapon, and so that creates accountability. That's different from saying a lab leak which is a mistake, where producing bioweapons is the intent to harm. And so, we weren't surprised when we saw this same narrative being propagated by some of the exact same people that were pushing Biolabs narratives during COVID. And one other thing I'll say is that this tends to happen within right-wing channels, and in the US media ecosystem, we see uptake by far-right actors of this Biolabs theory. And in one instance, it's kind of true, like most modern nations do have medical schools that have bio labs, but the allegation that they're manufacturing bioweapons is a very different case entirely. But what's interesting about it is that the reason why we ended up with

a narrative about Biolabs that was also being circulated in China about Ukraine, as well as India about Ukraine, Brazil about Ukraine, was because the initial reason that Putin had given for the invasion, this deNazification just didn't carry enough weight, it wasn't viral, it wasn't memetic or sticky in any way, people were reticent to believe it. And then there's also just this really weird aspect of misinformation where we study not just right-wing politics and right-wing politicians, but we study the far right. And I don't really love the specter style of this is the left, this is the far left, but the far right in the US had for several years been excited by, and when I say far right, I mean people who are white supremacists, primarily, they had been excited by what was happening in Ukraine in terms of the Dundas region, and this group called the Azov Battalion, and the Azov Battalion had numerous far-right elements when it first got started, it's become a much more general movement since then. So Putin was hoping that this notion of deNazification, removal of the Azov Battalion, the seizure of the Ukrainian government would resonate globally with people who were pro-eliminating Nazis.

Eric

Authoritarian.

Joan

Yeah, Authoritarians, Exactly. And what we end up with, of course, is that the narrative just kind of falls flat, and it doesn't go anywhere, and so the justification for war had to move into other realms. And then, of course, there's been a lot of disinformation that's been hard to fact check just by virtue of the fact that many reporters in Russia have been silenced. You know, I don't know if as a journalist, you have any comments on that new law that Russia passed that basically criminalizes anyone that calls this a war and not a special military operation and how you would even advise other reporters on how to not run afoul of that and end up really getting stuck in that situation where they might be up on charges.

Eric

Oh, as a journalist, that is totally chilling. And you see either major Western news media from the New York times and the post and CNN and BBC pull out because it's impossible to not call when reporting on war and not call a war a war. It reminds me of some of the debates that the media had in the Trump administration when there was a lot of debate here in the US about whether to call Trump's false declarations lies. And it was considered a loaded word because it implied knowledge of intent. And eventually, it just became clear that the falsehoods came with such rapidity and such consistency that there could be no other explanation. Other than that, the speaker had no intent of being factually accurate. And so, in its sense, it echoes that in a much more severe authoritarian way, that words have power, and some words are now a kind of declaration of stand against the state. It is chilling. And, it probably contributes in a large way to the fact that, according to polls, most Russians actually support this war.

Joan

Yeah. And I think the protracted battles with Ukraine over the last eight years has put Russian citizens in a very particular mindset where they've been hearing about Ukraine and about the Dundas region and about separatists, and this far-right group, the Azov Battalion, and so I'm not surprised that the internal media in Russia had this very convincing effect on the citizenry. However, it seems to me that Putin, as a common enemy of many nations now, and the NATO nation in particular, does make the voices of Ukrainians that much more important now. Whereas they had been considered a very small country, we had, of course, the first impeachment trial about Trump withholding aid to Ukraine. Now we see that in a very different light; given that Putin has invaded and is trying to take over the entire country, withholding \$330 million now seems like, oh, what did you know that we didn't know ahead of time? So it does strike me that Ukraine is a stage for geopolitics to play out. I wasn't surprised to see that Putin had made demands of NATO and not just Ukraine; it's starting to get the moniker of Putin's war, right? But him being a common enemy and Russian citizens being somewhat attuned to this narrative that Ukraine must be liberated, we have to, as academics and journalists, be skeptical of the polling and penetration into Russian information markets because a lot gets said that is not heard in bars and living rooms. And I hesitate to believe that anybody is completely deluded. Even the narrative that the Russian military believed that they were going to be welcomed with open arms, but now several weeks into the war, I hesitate to think that anybody really holds those beliefs and thinks that Ukraine is somehow seeking or the Ukrainian citizens are somehow seeking relief from Zelinsky who's by and large, one of the first democratic elected presidents that is not a government installed by Putin himself, in very recent terms. So there's a lot to unpack and pick apart, and your right to bring up the fog of war, and then of course, the complications that come from journalists not being able to be in those areas and not be present. I think we should wrap on talking a little bit about the journalists from the AP who were for 20 days in Mariupol, where there has been devastating shelling and bombing, air raids, and street combat, and these were pretty much the last international reporters in this area. So I'd love to hear from you a little bit about what you think the consequences are of going to need to rely probably more on social media accounts of what's happening in clips to try to tell the story of what's happening on the ground, and if we're potentially going to slide into more of a misinformation haze than we ever have in the past.

Eric

Unfortunately, that will be the result, Joan. I don't see any alter; it will become a kind of citizen reporting, citizen journalism through social media or propaganda from either side. The thing that strikes me about this conflict, which is often probably with some exaggeration, called the first social media war, is the dual nature that the two-faced nature of social media and technology. Its technology alerted us through signal intercepts to Putin's intention and allowed the US by revealing the intelligence to strip from Putin's hands the pretext for his invasion, and pretty much handcuffed his own propaganda wars at least to justify the invasion at the outset. And it also has delivered us on the positive side, truthful images of the destruction that is going on there. At the same time it's enabled, as we've seen for years throughout the west enabled, network propaganda and falsehood to spread rapidly. And, the upshot is really to make even denser the fog of war and

the confusion about what is happening in a situation that is fluid and which information sources are very, very constrained. What's your thinking about it?

Joan

I mean, as an academic, we don't tell the future, but we do have some predictions and capacities to think about what's next and what's on the horizon. And, what I've been watching for is looking at how US media is starting to tilt into other news stories. And so, unfortunately, this war is going to be ongoing, but the place to get the most up-to-date information about it is probably going to wain, and it's probably going to require us to rely more on social media. And a lot has been said about TikTok and videos that are coming out of TikTok about the fighting and the experience of the war by everyday Ukrainian people who are going through it. And so it is confounding, especially given the limited reach of international news outlets at this moment to be able to cover this. But my hope is that US media doesn't look away; that does the work it needs to do to produce global witnessing. I've been very impressed with the Ukrainian diaspora. You know, there are many millions of Ukrainians outside of Ukraine that still feel that love of home and are doing everything they can to get the word out from their friends and relatives and keep each other in check. But I had one very disheartening experience where the people in a Ukrainian community had been sharing videos and whatnot, and the video started circulating that claimed the US had decided to send planes. This was a couple of weeks ago, and people were so happy. They were so happy the planes were being sent. And of course, it was misinformation, most likely just for clicks, likes, and shares, a little bit of clout chasing, which unfortunately produced a lot of hope and excitement in people that really were desperate for good news. And so I'm very careful to say that I think you're right about there being two faces to this war, and we might be doing a disservice to Ukrainians to claim that they have won an information war where we're still so unsure of what is going to happen and how Russians are perceiving this war and what extent we can universalize the narrative about Ukraine being desiring democracy and them wanting to move more into a Western framework for elections and democracy, whereas Putin's version of the Soviet Union and wanting to reanimate or make Russia great again, means that Ukraine would have to fall, in order to have that happen. And other potential independent former Soviet Union states would have to fall. And so, I am a believer that this is the first major move that, if Putin does win, it's going to set up the rest of the world for many decades of very trying and needless and senseless violence.

Eric

That is a sobering thought.

Joan

Yeah!

Eric

God, I hope that it stops here at Ukraine's borders, but we absolutely don't know. And we are as a global clash of power in uncharted territory, although it has some very ominous echoes from the past, but let's turn now to the question of technology and information that we've seen in Ukraine, as both of us said, both the good side of technology and its power communicate and bring people together and spread information. And in that sense, and in a lot of the information is promoting democracy or saving the democratic forces at work in Ukraine. And at the same time, there is plenty of incentive. As you mentioned, to spread falsehood either to promote the aggressor side in this war or simply to stir chaos. And our guest has done considerable thinking about the upside and the downside of technology and has some original thoughts about the origin of it. So with that, let's turn to our interview with Rob Reich.

Eric

Rob's a professor of philosophy at Stanford University and the director of the center for ethics and society, co-director of the center on *Philanthropy and Civil Society*, and associate director of the *Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence*. He teaches a course on ethics and technology at Stanford and is the author with fellow Stanford profs Mehran Sahami and Jeremy Weinstein of a new book, *System Error: Where Big Tech Went Wrong and How We Can Reboot*. Welcome, Rob.

Rob

Great to be here.

Joan

Thanks for coming on.

Eric

Now, Rob, you, and Merhan and Jeremy, in addition to working on this book together, teach a course on ethics at Stanford; it's widely attended. How did that come about? Why was there a need for it?

Rob

Stanford University is, in certain respects, ground zero of Silicon Valley maybe; no other university is as responsible for the seeding of the ideas and the production of the pipeline of technical talent that has powered the digital revolution and over the past generation. And in particular, in the past 10 years, I witnessed from my part of campus with the humanities and social sciences a great migration of undergraduate students over to the engineering school to begin majoring in record numbers in computer science. And at the same time, especially in the past five years, the bloom is

off the rows of Silicon Valley. We're now all aware that it's not all just upside and liberation and spreading democracy and freedom from Silicon Valley companies, but also misinformation, disinformation, toxic hate speech, privacy violations, biased algorithms, and automation that displaces workers and jobs, and on and on and on. So there's a much wider awareness of the negative social consequences of many of the things that have also delivered great benefits to people. And so we started teaching together because we thought it was necessary to try something like a kind of cultural intervention on campus, like stop hopping on the CS, computer science bandwagon, or conveyor belt, don't disregard technical skills, but if you're going to be a technologist, take on board some social science and policy frameworks take on board, some ethical frameworks for thinking about the great power that comes along with technical skill. And the success of the class then led us to thinking that we had some good material and was the inspiration for writing the book.

Joan

I'm going to double click on a few things that you said there about being a pipeline for the school Stanford being a pipeline for some of these technology workers, and also in the hub of Silicon Valley. Of course, all that sunshine in California can make us all a little delirious and tend to see the positive side of things. I say this as a graduate of UC San Diego. But, as you think about your career, as someone who is in the humanities, would you consider yourself having come from a place of techno-optimism and now, or maybe, more of a realist, or how would you classify your own journey into thinking about tech ethics more deeply?

Rob

Yeah. Well, it's a personal question you ask, and I'll give you a personal answer, Joan, which is that I grew up in New Jersey. I'm kind of home and sentiment and sensibility as an east coaster. But, I've been out in Silicon Valley teaching at Stanford for 25 years. Not having anything to do until just recently with the school of engineering or the computer science department. I've never had a tour of duty in a Silicon Valley company, but at least I feel like I've gotten to know a bunch of people who are engineers or technologists. And, I kind of felt like there's a simple east coast kind of snark that can happen with Silicon Valley and technology, which takes the form in the media of something like, "oh my gosh, those founders and venture capitalists who go to burning man and like go to the hot tub at Esalen and the woo woo countercultural dreams and techno utopias of these crazy people we don't understand." And that just seems to me not to capture the actual texture of what goes on. And maybe by way of contrast here for anyone who's listening, I'm a 50-year-old, middle-aged person who went to school on the east coast. And when I graduated college, I remember nearly half of my graduating class applying for a job on wall street, born management consulting. And, I remember thinking it was kind of obvious, a nice paycheck, some social esteem that went along with that, but one thought to themselves that going to work for McKinsey or Bain was going to be the best thing you could do to improve the world. By contrast, getting a computer science degree, people do believe, and they had some reason to believe that acquiring technical skills was a way to make the world a better place. The early optimism of

Google and organizing the world's information or simply the idea that as 21-year-old learning how to code, you could build an app or a product in a relatively short amount of time, and potentially millions of people could start aren't using it next week, or next month you couldn't do that studying economics necessarily. And certainly not philosophy.

Joan

Not sociology, either.

Rob

Not sociology, either. So I had, on the one hand, some sympathy with the mindset and the vision. It did seem like there was something different about getting technical skills and this pipeline. Then in my day, going to work for a management consulting firm, and yet the great power that the programming Davids had become the Goliaths. And now it was the big tech that had this recruitment pipeline. And the simple story to tell that you were going to put a dent in the universe, meaning it in a positive way, no longer was tenable. And, I wanted to try to be a part of understanding that and then communicating a richer set of frameworks to people who wanted the technical skills.

Eric

In addition to techno-optimism, the kind of messianic approach that you discovered when you got out to the west coast, there's a particular kind of amoral philosophy that is peculiar to the engineering mindset, and because of the growth of big tech and the power assumed by all these engineers, that's now become kind of the defining philosophy for a huge sector of the economy. Would you tell us a little bit about the optimization mindset and how it contributes to the place we find ourselves now?

Rob

Yeah, the optimization mindset I've come to believe is really the key thing to understand for any of us who use digital tools and platforms, which is to say all of us. You don't need to understand artificial intelligence, you don't even understand machine learning, but you do need to understand this optimization approach. And there's a domain in which someone with an engineering education learns to be an optimizer. It's sort of written into the very training you get as a computer scientist, looking for a computationally tractable solution to a particularly well-defined problem, and you're trying to optimize the solution. But, this optimization approach has its limitations even within computer science. And when it becomes a kind of life outlook, I want to optimize my sleep, I want to optimize my exercise, I want to optimize my nutrition, why isn't democracy optimized? And you sort of bring optimization to everything in the world. I think then it actually becomes pretty

dangerous. So just to begin as a kind of illustration of what's wrong with optimization because, on the face of it it seems like it's good. Who would be against optimization if you could optimize? And as you said, Eric, it's an amoral approach, which sounds like an odd thing to say. But the reason is that optimization is just a means or a mechanism to try to accomplish some independently defined end or goal. And if you were to optimize for a bad end goal, you would be making the world worse, not better. And then, what's more, technologists need to find things to optimize that often have to be reduced to a mathematical or computationally tractable metric or a proxy for the end goal. So just by way of example, Facebook's mission is to connect the world. All right, well, how do they measure whether or not, their tools or platforms are connecting the world? There's a relatively simple proxy for that. The number of people on the platform and then the amount of time that people on the platform are engaging with the platform. Why should we believe that engagement on a platform is a proxy for positive human connection? We know for all kinds of reasons, it's not. And so, if you optimize using a proxy for a worthy end, you can get distracted by the proxy instead of actually going for the end. And then finally, the optimizers are just often for one thing, rather than all the things we care about. We put speed bumps on roads in order to slow down cars, making it less optimal to get from point A to point B because in school zones, we care about the safety of children. In so many domains of life, we have multiple values we care about, and yet the optimizers, if they're in charge, are often just optimizing for one thing, and that can upset a social balance for the wider array of things we care about.

Joan

It's interesting that you bring that up about optimization because some of the people that work in trust and safety that I talk to often are at war with the growth team at these platforms, and they're optimized for growth, and they don't understand us safety people, right? And it's been taking a long time for these companies to realize that there are harms embedded in the products, and it's taken obviously an even longer time for the government to rethink its role here. So as you think about this optimization mindset, are you interested in regulation? Is it the case, maybe, that social media is just incompatible with democracy? And, we have to rethink the design of the communication technology itself rather than thinking regulation's going to come, and somehow fix this because I work with Dr Latanya Sweeney, and she always says, "technology is policy," right? Because the way the technology is designed, by and large, leads to the policies that you're going to get. But I would love to get your take on this idea about if regulation is or isn't the answer or what kinds, and maybe there is some kind of fundamental design flaw here if the optimization is at the core, rather than at the periphery.

Rob

Joan, I love the question, and I'm going to give you kind of all of the above is the answer. We need a different ethic of responsibility for people who work inside tech companies. So, for example, the trust and safety people have a genuine voice and power within the company in addition to the growth team. My takeaway from the Frances Haugen, Facebook whistleblowing incident is that Facebook had staffed up its internal research team with first-rate PhD level, quality researchers who actually documented a number of different harms and problems presented in various ways to

the company and were effectively ignored or overruled. And so what was left for them to do? To leak and become whistleblowers. So, it would be nice to have a different ethic of responsibility, a different set of professional norms with inside companies. And, of course, we also need regulation. Regulation that can come in the form of some civil society pressure on companies so that formal legal regulation, but a set of countervailing forces to the concentrated power of tech companies and then also government regulation. And I think we are entering an era now with the appointment of Tim Wu and Lena Khan, antitrust actionist beginning, of course, we had GDPR a few years ago out of the European Union, we're entering a new era, which there will be an awoken set of responsibilities amongst government agencies from different places in the world, trying to contain some of the obvious harms and also provide guardrails for the excesses, of kind of unconstrained profit-making approach to especially social media platforms.

Eric

I imagine a lot of people hearing about the government setting up guardrails against unconstrained profitability or determining the goals that algorithms that a social media platform ought to have as a very scary prospect. You know, you don't have to go back too far to picture Senate hearings in which the senators were totally in the dark about the technology that they were pretending to inquire about for regulation. What has to happen before regulation, at least for the US, becomes effective?

Rob

Yeah. It's such a good point, Eric, because it's easy enough for the person who studies democratic theory to say, "let democracy rise to the challenge." But of course, we're all aware of the obvious problems with our actually existing public agencies and elected leaders, and there's such a stunning lack of technical competence in so many of the places that would ostensibly be responsible for regulation. So, as I say, I do think the times are changing a bit, the hearings with Frances Haugen were far more informed than what we saw a few years ago where famously Senator Orrin Hatch said "Mr Zuckerberg, I don't understand how Facebook makes money." We're getting better-informed staffing within the Senate and the house, including in some of the executive agencies with Lena Khan and Tim Wu as examples of that, but this is going to be a long-time horizon effort. And so one of the things that I think the class that we teach at Stanford also aims to carry out is to make it seem as appealing to bring your technical skill into government or civil society organizations as into a company. *System Error*, the book we wrote, ends with the short profile of my current technical hero, Audrey Tang, the digital minister of Taiwan, who does absolutely extraordinary work using the technical skills that everyone gets with a computer science major but on behalf of helping coordinate civic participation, rather than a profit-making approach in a startup or a big tech company. And we need an alternative Pantheon of heroes or icons to which the 19 and 20-year-olds can aspire rather than just the Zuckerberg, the Evan Spiegels, the Instagram, et cetera. Those are fine to do, nothing against entrepreneurship and innovation, but let's also have as an alter her approach, a civic technologist.

Joan

I love that idea. I had the pleasure of interviewing Audrey Tang and talking about what they did during the pandemic. And what was interesting about Taiwan's approach to medical misinformation is that they employed a strategy of humor over a rumor. And instead of just replying to everything like, "no, no, we're not outta toilet paper. You can get masks," et cetera. They had a dog, a Shiba Inu that was kind of well known as the dogecoin kind of dog. And they were able to target rumors and then attach this meme anywhere in the replies on social media so that the rumor, if it did spread, also spread with the rebuttal attached, and that's something that I've been a big proponent of if people especially civil society organizations can produce memetic media quickly. And I wonder, this gets to the question of many of the conversations that we're having about regulation really are difficult to overcome the fear about it affecting first amendment rights in any way, shape or form, especially if the government is involved in setting limits on amplification or setting limits on the way algorithms work or providing transparency about that. And I'm wondering from your perspective, is there anything out there, any proposal that you think would get us closer to at least taking out some of this misinformation? Is it that we need to enforce more laws and rules against fraud online? Like where would you go with that? If you wanted to, just like you say, make a dent in the problem, not fix the whole thing.

Rob

Sure. Well, emphasize here that I don't have legal training. I'm not a first amendment lawyer.

Joan

Yeah. Me neither. It can be totally illegal; whatever you suggest is totally fine with me.

Rob

Yeah. Well, one of the indulgences is of philosophers to say, why should we constrain ourselves with the constitution as it is. Let's imagine that we could change that too, but that's not a very helpful approach right now.

Joan

I think it's helpful.

Rob

Okay. Well, I'll try to stay within my understanding of things, at least for the moment. Well, the first thing to say is, even though the US is an outlier in other democratic societies with respect to a

seemingly absolutist commitment as embodied in the first amendment to freedom of speech and expression. There're still constitutional, permissible forms regulating speech that involve one incitement to violence, two intellectual property violations, three liable, and harassment. And, we could keep going with various other things that aren't forms of constitutionally protected speech. So you're certainly right, Joan, that there are some severe limitations in the jurisprudence of the first amendment that would seem to make an unconstitutional variety of forms of regulation. But that's why I think a lot of the discussion at the moment is focused on section 230 to get wonky about this for any listener who doesn't know, section 230 of the 1996 communications decency act is legal immunity to most internet companies, social media companies for any content that's published on their platforms as long as it's user-generated content, rather than having been produced by people who are in the employment of the company itself. Unlike famously in the traditional media, which is liable for various forms of untruths or liability et cetera. So, there are ways in which to begin to try to impose various liability constraints on internet companies or social media platforms. Their traditional worry, of course, is that they will overregulate and takedown way more content than they might otherwise be expected to do because they don't want to fall into any legal liability. I'm not sufficiently well placed to assess whether that's the right response or an accurate response. But I do think that the world wouldn't change overnight if we made modest changes to section 230. But I think we also have lots of other things we can do in the meantime, which is to have, say, independent algorithmic audits so that we see that there are content moderation policies for any social media platform. And yet we have to rely on internal reports about how it is that they're being enforced. Let's have an independent set of agencies that monitor whether or not the companies are actually adhering to and enforcing their own content moderation policies. And if there's a huge gap, that would be a problem from a standpoint of liability, that doesn't impose any first amendment problems on the companies, it just says here are you stated policies, we'd like to know whether you're actually enforcing them or not and, we're not going to just trust your self-report from a quarterly takedown report or something. The book contains a bunch of other examples of this type of thing. And I'll just add, at the end, the one that seems obvious is that antitrust approaches, I think would be good. Antitrust is not going to solve the misinformation or disinformation problem, but it will create potentially more competition in the marketplace so that different users can opt into different content moderation regimes or policies by migrating from app to app or system to system, rather than just relying upon being locked into the one network and where all their friends are, or has the greatest amplification possibility. So I think greater competition in the marketplace would be good for innovation and good for users from the standpoint of more choice, with respect to different content moderation policies.

Eric

I love the idea of more competition as a way to modify the misinformation and disinformation regime in which we now live. But in a world of network effects being the 900-pound gorilla means basically that you're the only gorilla in the jungle and the only one with an economic model that works. How do you foster competition?

Rob

Yeah, I mean and here there's going to be a technical component to this, which involves something about data portability or data interoperability. So to use an imprecise metaphor, there was lots of lock-in into mobile phones, and then there were laws passed that created the ability to port your number from one carrier to another carrier. And that really unlocked a lot of competition in the marketplace. Similarly, if I'm friends with Joan on Twitter, but I want to go to a different social media platform, it would be nice to be able to, in a privacy-protecting way, port my friend network or have some data interoperability between platforms. I don't think to the best of my knowledge when I speak to my engineering friends, that this is an especially difficult technical problem to solve. So, in other words, there are somewhat straightforward technical solutions to data portability or interoperability, but there are genuine privacy concerns. If Joan hasn't consented, and if I port myself over the door to another service to herself being on that service, then maybe there's a privacy concern. Because she's then being harnessed to the privacy policies of this other place, these are a combination of policy and technical problems to confront, but they're not impossible. I think there are potential solutions here, and we haven't really even tried. Of course, it's not in the interest of any of the large companies to consent to this. If you're Facebook, why would you want people to be able to port their friend network over? You don't want that. And so that's part of the problem too.

Joan

And Tim Burners Lee has also talked a bit about this data, interoperability proposing this idea of pods, where people had different lockers and compartments, where they could share some data, not all data and it seems to lead to this hyper-personalization and individualization and making everybody more and more responsible for oceans worth of data related to themselves and their livelihoods. And maybe it's better that we have more access to delete buttons, and ways of erasing things rather than just, or maybe the data should expire at some point there's a thinking that has yet to be done around these issues around data, this idea that the meme of "the internet is forever" seems to carry forward. I wanted to ask you a little bit more about antitrust as we start to wrap up here, which is to say that the Facebook whistleblower has been really clear that she doesn't think antitrust is a remedy here. And, why do you think she's coming out so strongly on antitrust? And, what do you think are the arguments really against it that do seem to really make it difficult to do in practice?

Rob

Good. Well, I take Frances Haugen's case before Congress to have been in a very important and productive way to have centered attention on algorithmic amplification as the core of the problem of social media platforms, in particular with misinformation and disinformation. And I think that's a better place to focus attention than on the seeming old fixation on how much stuff the platform deletes or bans. So much more importance should be directed at, or attention directed at, the amplification of speech rather than the deletion of speech. Now, if you were to break Facebook up into five Facebooks or twenty Facebooks, because of those network effects that Eric mentioned

before, the dynamic that you'd predict in the absence of any kind of data portability or interoperability would be that people would eventually migrate to the largest platform or the largest number of users and we'd just get the amplification problem all over again. Or alternatively, if you think that misinformation and disinformation really are the central problem you're trying to solve, you'll still have algorithm amplification at the heart of each of these over twenty Facebooks. And you'll have smaller companies with smaller teams and less resources to throw at the problem, misinformation, and disinformation. And so it'll be more difficult for any one of the twenty Facebooks instead of the one Facebook to tackle the problem. That's what I think the Haugen thought, on behalf of why.

Joan

Yeah, but you can't buy that as a real argument. Can you? Do you buy that?

Rob

Well, I think that antitrust is an important solution to a different problem, so if you thought misinformation was what you absolutely had to fix, I wouldn't have chosen antitrust as the best approach, but if you want to point to anti-competitive practices in the marketplace in particular, in mergers and acquisitions, then I think that antitrust does have a very important approach. And I think that it's even hard to understand at some level, take the Google search algorithm, Google has a 90% share of all searches in the English language world, to the best of my knowledge. What would it really mean to break up the Google search page? You'd force people to use Bing or DuckDuckGo or something else isn't hard to imagine exactly what other search results from that. But what you can do is say stop acquiring Instagram, stop acquiring WhatsApp, Google, stop acquiring Ways or YouTube or whatever it turns out to be, and absorb your early competitors in the marketplace into your own company. That would be a salutary thing. And that is where I think antitrust can be quite successful.

Joan

But I feel like one of the reasons why we're in this predicament about the misinformation that we are now is because of the market dominance aspects of Facebook, Twitter, particularly Facebook though, and the ways in which it has enabled infrastructured media manipulators and disinformers for over a decade now. And so, when they're trying to rest from their infrastructure, a figure like Alex Jones, or a network like InfoWars, or QAnon, they almost can't separate it from the product itself. And they're drawn again, like, exactly as you're saying in the argument, they're drawn just like other users, the largeness or the scale of the platform. And so, to my mind, it might be better to descale these platforms and deal with different versions because not every platform has the same issues. Then it would be to say, all right, let's let one company have all the resources, zero of the liability, and let's just keep marching towards democracy because I don't think we're going to get there together.

Rob

Agreed. I think that I once recall hearing Nicole Wong, who was a lawyer policymaker at Google in the early days and then went to work in the Obama administration. She said something like; “we need a slow food movement in technology or the equivalent of low technology”. And I take her to mean partly this idea of getting away from factory farms to smaller-scale agriculture and the equivalent of that in the social media world. Why have one mega-producer, Facebook, as the only place to go? Instead, we need lots of smaller gardens. And in a new addition to that, it wouldn't be technically difficult for anyone with huge followings and follower accounts to put a little bit of sand in the gears of virality there. So if you take me with my 10,000 Twitter followers.

Joan

Not bad. Okay. Not bad.

Rob

Not bad. Yeah.

Joan

Not bad for a professor.

Rob

Right, exactly. But let's keep in mind the reference pool. So when you get into 500,000 or a couple million followers, anything you post is guaranteed to reach a great scale pretty quickly there. I just think there's nothing difficult with saying, we're going to slow down on the distribution of speech that we see beginning to go viral in order to subject it to a variety of human moderation rather than merely automated moderation. In order to be sure we're enforcing our internal policies, in order to be sure that we feel like there's no problem with the kind of speech, whether it's in the form of incitement to violence, hate speech, et cetera, et cetera, just slow down the virality, with an eye toward people with especially large followers.

Eric

Rob, let me close with a question from the past, as speaking as a member of the mainstream media and a representative.

Joan

It's okay, Eric, we forgive you, we forgive you.

Eric

I just kind of feel like I'm rising up from the mist here, but my company would love to be a better competitor at distributing information than Facebook, but we just don't have the scale. But looking ahead to the future, when we've rebooted the information ecosystem, what's the role of professional media, the mainstream media, in a future that has more competition, has more regulation, and has sort of more human-centric technology?

Rob

Yeah, that's a great question. Well, one of the things that's usually said about the alleged benefits of social media or the internet is that old school media with its professional norms of fact-checking and aspirations for truth, there were gatekeepers you had to get, you couldn't just publish something. The editor had to approve it; relatively few people got to speak. And to my mind, the internet and social media has produced a superabundance of information and content, which then the internet companies have had to solve. Because rather than a set of experts or curators or editors using their professional norms of expertise to judge what's worthy and less worthy information, now we need a search algorithm to judge what's relevant to us, and we need a recommendation system to lift up the things that are interesting to us. But of course, those algorithms are not looking for truth or civic interest, or diversity of opinion. What they're looking for is engagement or ad, click-throughs, et cetera. The language that I so often hear about the internet and social media is that its democratized voice is in certain respects. Now everyone has a potentially global audience in seconds if you can find some content that you produce that goes viral, but it also means that we've eliminated the set of professional judgments that sort the better information from worse information, and there should always be a diversity of judgments being made there. We don't want a single class of experts deciding that, but in a world in which everyone can publish anywhere to everyone is a cacophony, and it's very difficult to sort better and worse information. So, I would love to see a world in which the traditional role of the media as a diverse set of actors exercising professional judgment somehow gets incorporated into the world of the internet and social media so that we have a better filter on better and worse information than just click-through rates or engagement with extremist content, and that historic role of the media has been lost to our great democratic risk, I think as well as our interest as ordinary citizens.

Eric

I think that's a great place to leave it for us, on the side of truth, as we'd like to think of it, certainly.

Joan

I mean, yeah it seems like these days truth really does need an advocate and I'm really happy to have you teaching out at Stanford, although by law, I'm not allowed to say that Stanford is a good place, because of where I work at Harvard. So I just have to get one little.

Rob

One little dig in there. Exactly.

Joan

Just one quick dig about drunk on the sunlight but I'm really happy that you're there teaching, especially about technology and ethics, because I do think that we need to have a much more robust whole of society approach to the many different problems we face with the internet communication technologies and how they're changing our world and our politics.

Rob

Thanks for all the work you're doing, too, Joan and Eric; it's wonderful to be a guest on this new podcast. So thanks for having me.

Eric

Well, Rob, it is great to have you and for Joan at the Stanford of the east.

Joan

I'll come after you for that one. I'll figure it out. I'll figure out like wired is the Fast Company of what, I'll come for you eventually. I just got to work on it.

Eric

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