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Civil discourse and social media: Can they coexist?

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by Nadia Diakun-Thibault

"I believe in the potential of Facebook," she said during her testimony last week. "We can have social media we enjoy, that connects us, without tearing apart our democracy, putting our children in danger, and sowing ethnic violence around the world. We can do better." Frances Haugen, Facebook Whistleblower.

In this series, we will explore and define broadly scoped concepts, such as 'civil discourse', as an integral part of democracy, illustrate the complex nature of algorithms, machine learning, and deep learning, without requiring advanced degrees of the reader. In principle, algorithms, machine learning, and deep learning are easy to understand from their standard Oxford dictionary definitions:

- Algorithm: a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer.
- Machine learning: the use and development of computer systems that are able to learn and adapt without following explicit instructions, by using algorithms and statistical models to analyze and draw inferences from patterns in data.
- Deep learning: a type of machine learning based on artificial neural networks in which multiple layers of processing are used to extract progressively higher-level features from data.

These deceptively simple definitions capture the essence of each concept, but the human endeavour, data, computational work, and mathematics that are required to generate the inputs and the outputs cannot be explained or illustrated with oversimplification.

Social media is not a new phenomenon, and it did not begin with Facebook. In the 1970s, through the 1980s, there were systems being developed at universities that allowed for exchange of messages, information, and notes. In 1979, Usenet was born, and many can attest to its academic and non-academic utility. Bulletin-board systems (BBS), Internet Relay Chat (IRC) were popular and extensively used between the '80s and '90s (IRC is still widely used). MSN Messenger came online in 1999. There were various social media tools: Live Journal, Habbo, Friendster, Skype, MySpace, and others, and it was not until 2004 that Facebook appeared. A host of other social media platforms followed. For a complete and very detailed timeline, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_social_media.

In 2020, the latest addition to the social media constellation was Clubhouse, audio-chat social networking app. On any given day, Canadians use messaging systems, blogging, micro-blogging, video platforms, or specialized platforms like Discord (gamers, artists, coders, and purveyors of select art). Discord describes itself as: "servers are organized into topic-based channels, where you can collaborate, share, and just talk about your day, without clogging up a group chat." What distinguishes Discord is that the platform is 'invite-only.'

Humans naturally gravitate towards congregation of any kind: hobbies, interests, beliefs, community service, sports, music, art... it is the nature of a social being to prefer community ahead of solitude. Community participation rewards with support, camaraderie, joint action for the benefit of a select cohort that, without difficulty, benefits society. What may begin in a village, in time, benefits humankind.

Discourse is, simply put, a conversation and exchange of ideas, a debate on issues from various points-of-view. Discourse ends in compromise, resolution, and a meeting of minds. Without a doubt, the application of technological means of discourse bridged distances, in real-time or near-real-time, increasing the ability to share ideas, news, and collaborate on global projects, and has extended the reach of the village to the world.

Without a doubt, the application of technological means of discourse has amplified the benefits.

Without a doubt, the application of technological means has also given those who would wish to sow discontent through misinformation and disinformation the power to tip the balance of power.

Both the benefits and the detriments are the outcomes of how algorithms, machine learning, and deep learning are used, and the purposes for which they are used. This brings us to Facebook and Frances Haugen's revelations.

Facebook used algorithms that benefitted the company financially, hurt society through the spread of hate, lies, demagoguery, and effected serious harm to young people. Facebook, as a platform and company, became an existential threat to democracy.

Next week: the Frances Haugen testimony and Facebook.

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