Toward a People's Social Media
Contribution to GTI Forum Technology and the Future

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The steady pace of technological development can be easily taken for granted when the social order appears stable, as new innovations help meet society's needs and demands in forms that are usually uncontroversial, even if they sometimes come at a surprising speed. But in pivotal moments of historical change, or times of crisis like the present, when the future looks uncertain, new technological developments become politically contentious in ways that can, if we observe them carefully, reveal much about the present and help us anticipate what kinds of futures are possible.

But this requires an adequate conceptual framework for making sense of the interplay between technology and society, not one based on the celebratory marketing rhetoric of the industry behind the innovations. The lure of technological determinism is understandable, but as multiple crises deepen and defensive responses to the problems that follow in wake of technological disruptions are articulated, it becomes clearer that such thinking serves as an apology for the anti-human trajectory of the development by currently dominant forces behind the technologies we are offered: "Resistance is futile" is the main lesson of such approaches.

An alternative framework of thought is needed to set our world on a transition towards sustainability. We need to imagine how technologies can serve different, more democratic goals. A social constructionist framework that sees each particular technology serving a particular interest at a particular time is such an alternative, but it is often unable to explain the unintended consequences that arise or the path dependence of innovations. What is needed is an approach that can interrogate the relationship between the broader structures of power and the overall

trajectory of technological development. In other words, we need to understand technological developments as taking place within a context of complex social systems as a whole.

Such a conceptual framework can be illustrated through examination of the new systems of media and communication technology that have come to dominate the flow of information around the world in recent years. Social media platforms have occupied a central role in the struggles for power in many states in the last half decade, but they can also be subject to regulatory constraints at the hands of governments. Dominant platforms function as the means of diffusion of information, misinformation, and ideological content, shaping our cultural values and political behavior. How these systems are further developed will be crucial to determining our future, since the values embedded in the techno-social systems of the future, and the ways that they are designed, implemented, and regulated will depend on the ideas promoted by these platforms.

While such networks were originally hailed as liberating us from the gatekeepers of information, these systems have been developed in ways that are deeply imbricated with the existing structure of economic power, and consequently have furthered our progress along the Conventional World trajectory that is heading towards Barbarization. The basic business model of all the dominant platforms is the extraction of profit not from selling services to their users, but from selling the attention of their users to advertisers. Thus it is the demand of the advertisers that determines how the systems operate, not the needs of the public. This system is intended to maximize the value of the users' attention, which incentivizes the platforms to manipulate the algorithms that control the distribution of information across the dominant platforms in ways that provoke emotionally resonant responses from the users.

It is now clear, from both academic analysis and whistleblowers from within the corporations that operate the platforms, that this process amplifies extremist political tendencies and drives a polarization of political discourse. More broadly, the effect might be described as the shaping of the consciousness of the users in ways that suit the needs of existing economic interests of platform capital, and of the consumer capitalist economy more generally.

The resulting harms to the democratic functioning of political systems are visible in a number of countries. But the impact on electoral processes is not the only observable effect. Misinformation

about many issues, such as public health crises and climate change, presents obstacles to efforts to solve these crises through collective rationality. In general, these algorithmic harms are inherent to the commercial operation of the platforms and make it difficult to ensure technological innovation is oriented towards solving these problems (as in the case of sustainable energy sources) or used to solve them when made available (as in the case of COVID vaccines).

These problems are now well known, and efforts to deal with them through regulation have begun in a number of liberal democracies, including Europe, the UK, the US, and Canada. Perhaps this gives hope that the problems will be overcome and a more democratic way of distributing information can be regulated into existence. But what has been proposed so far does not address the basic problems at the level of the business model and its effect on the minds of the users. If the amplification of the tendencies that are pushing our societies towards barbarism is to be countered, we will need sustained political pressure in multiple societies to ensure that the flow of information is freed from the demands of private, unaccountable interests. Such pressure is not likely to be successful in the immediate future, but should be supported where it emerges.

This implies that the society-technology relationship needs to be understood as existing within the structure of material power of a neoliberal capitalist economy. Innovations in energy sources, bioengineering, artificial intelligence, and other fields of technology are also enmeshed in such as a structure and as such are driven by the interests of those with the resources to invest. As with communication technology, this means that technological systems are most often developed, extended, organized, and ultimately used in ways that serve the existing structure of power in our social system. This structure of power needs to be challenged so that newer, more humane technologies can be devised. Otherwise, new technological development will likely continue to lead us further down the road to a future of Barbarization.

We need to support struggles for more democratic technologies and for more democratic processes of technological development, but we also need to see these struggles as part of a struggle against the concentration of economic power more generally. To do that, we need to imagine more democratic technologies, and envision how they can be integrated into social orders that are built on the basis of value systems that afford us a more complete flourishing of human capacities.

About the Author

Derek Hrynyshyn is a political theorist who teaches courses on media and politics at York University. He is author of *Limits of the Digital Revolution: How Mass Media Culture Persists in a Social Media World* and is currently working on a book-length study of the political economy of the media in Canada. He holds a PhD in political science from York University.

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