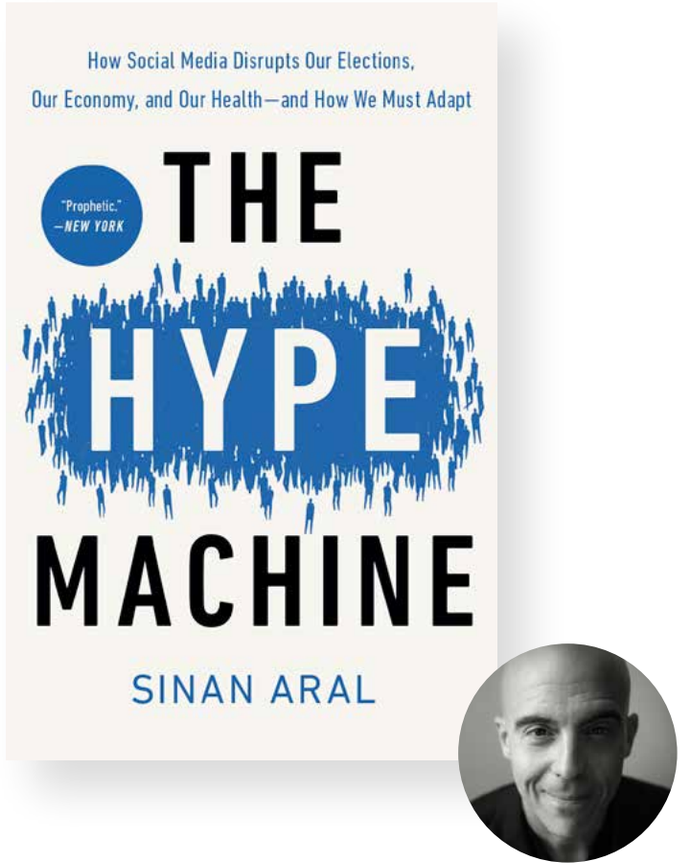
SOCIAL MEDIA AT A CROSSROADS

25 SOLUTIONS FROM THE SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

MIT INITIATIVE ON THE DIGITAL ECONOMY



Sinal Aral, director of the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy and author of *The Hype Machine*, led the Social Media Summit @ MIT on April 22, 2021.

SOCIAL MEDIA SOLUTIONS

Pervasive digital connectivity requires new thinking.

What does it mean today to rescue truth online or to humanize digital design? Why are free speech and antitrust heated issues once again?

The answer is that social media has struck many nerves. Far beyond family chats, photo updates, and public relations campaigns, social media now has a sweeping impact on nearly every aspect of society. All of society—including our homes and workplaces—is digitally connected in unprecedented and potentially dangerous ways.

Sinan Aral, director of the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy (IDE) writes extensively about the massive influence of social media. In his latest book, *The Hype Machine*, he points out that social media platforms are no longer simple conduits of engagement; they are huge economic empires.

From the U.S. presidential elections and aftermath, to attitudes about coronavirus vaccines, Aral argues that it's impossible to ignore the dramatic impact of social media. "We are truly at a crossroads where decisions are being made on how to regulate and institute policies to ameliorate the harmful effects of social media," he said. "It's time to fix the crisis."

While most agree on the need for reform, big obstacles remain. Who should dictate and regulate social media—governments, the tech industry, or independent committees? Who will enforce regulations that emerge?

KEY ISSUES

- Too much power in too few corporate hands that stymies innovation and competition.
- The perception—and in many cases, the reality—that corporate profits and speed to market threaten consumer privacy, election integrity, and democratic goals.
- A proliferation of fake news reports amplified by algorithmic tools and network effects.
- Insufficient platform oversight, transparency, and regulatory pressure, particularly in the U.S.

"Social media is rewiring the central nervous system of humanity in real time and we're now at a crossroads between its promise and its peril."

SINAN ARAL

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

On April 22, 2021, the IDE hosted the MIT Social Media Summit, which attracted more than 20,000 virtual attendees. The event brought together business, policy, and academic experts to discuss social media trends and solutions that—as moderator Sinan Aral pointed out—can help "steer us toward the promise of digital technologies and away from the perils."

This report offers a six-point roadmap for platform reform. "We need all of these oars rowing in the same direction at once for substantive change to occur," said Aral.

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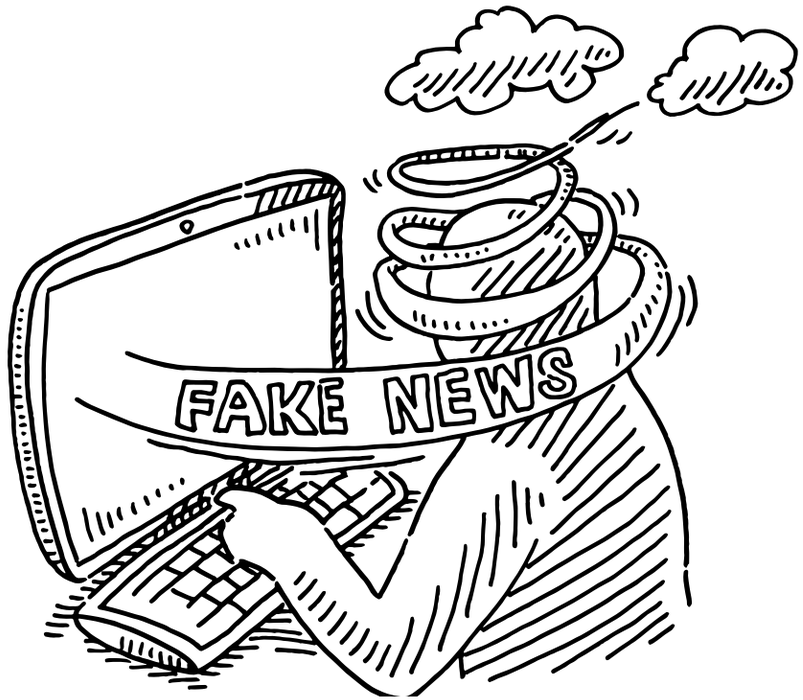
PANEL WATCH VIDEO



RESCUING TRUTH

Online media is aiding those who want to manipulate the truth for mass audiences.

SOLUTIONS

1. Hold platforms accountable for designs that amplify lies.
2. Focus on and shut down prolific disinformation networks.
3. Use content interventions to nudge people toward awareness of falsity and accuracy.
4. Use accuracy nudges to crowdsource falsity labels so that algorithms can be trained to automatically identify lies.

Social media is increasingly being used to obfuscate the truth by amplifying false ideas faster and farther than traditional media. Targeting and personalizing news feeds makes it difficult to uncover the source of false news online and for consumers to discern fact from fiction. And all too often, noted Sinan Aral, platforms and their advertisers reap the financial rewards of this online activity.

THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS

Maria Ressa knows first-hand about the precarious state of press freedom. As CEO of Rappler, a Philippines-based news organization, Ressa was convicted in June 2020 of libel for publishing stories about government actions. She was sentenced to up to six years in prison, then freed on bail.

Over the years, Rappler has fervently documented the plight of government disinformation in the Philippines. “The [Philippine] government has used social media to its advantage enabling insidious manipulation of facts on social platforms,” Ressa said. Ressa defines the false news campaigns—especially those on Facebook—as deliberate and calculated attempts to “infect the information ecosystem with lies that cause users to become impervious to facts.” She noted that users may not realize they’re being duped, but society has to call out disinformation for what it is.

Ali Velshi, a senior economic and business correspondent for NBC News, believes that it’s the role of journalists to bear witness to news and to hold power accountable. “But if that power is working to discredit you, over time that effort grows and creates distrust of the media,” said Velshi. “It doesn’t matter what facts or evidence you have. The media has been painted with the same brush as lies.”

Velshi encourages healthy debate to understand how to amplify pluralism. “Facts are not the enemy,” said Velshi. “Unreliability, dishonesty, and falsity are the enemy.”

POLICING CONTENT

Clint Watts of the Foreign Policy Research Institute draws on his experience with counter-terrorism and cyberwarfare to understand social media’s dynamics. The distinguished research fellow believes that some rating systems and digital verification tools, such as blockchain, could help to authenticate video and audio streams.

However, Watts notes that policing content with fact checking or warning labels generally doesn’t work since false content can be created faster online than it can be policed. Additionally, telling people what not to say undermines basic democratic ideals.

Watts recommends focusing on the most prolific offenders of false speech. “It usually comes down to a small network of big offenders,” he said. “We know about them and [enforcement] needs to focus there for maximum impact.”

PANELISTS READ BIOS

Camille François
CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER , GRAPHIKA INC.

Ali Velshi
HOST, VELSHI & BUSINESS CORRESPONDENT, NBC

Maria Ressa
CEO, RAPPLER

Clint Watts
DISTINGUISHED RESEARCH FELLOW,
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Despite the complexities, Camille François, Chief Innovation Officer at Graphika, is hopeful that a combination of regulatory and public pressure will curb abuse. “We must continue to shine a light on these networks of offenders,” she said.

François believes that incremental progress is being made. When issues surrounding fake news were raised five years ago, no one in Silicon Valley seemed to care. More recently, however, pressure on platform companies is being heeded to a small extent. “We live in a new reality,” François said. “It still isn’t perfect, we want more, but it proves that public pressure can work. We’re at a pivotal moment.”

> “Facts are not the enemy. Unreliability, dishonesty, and falsity are the enemy.”
>
> ALI VELSHI

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

RESCUING TRUTH

RE: CROWDSOURCING
- ☑ EVENTS
- ?… ☐ OPINIONS

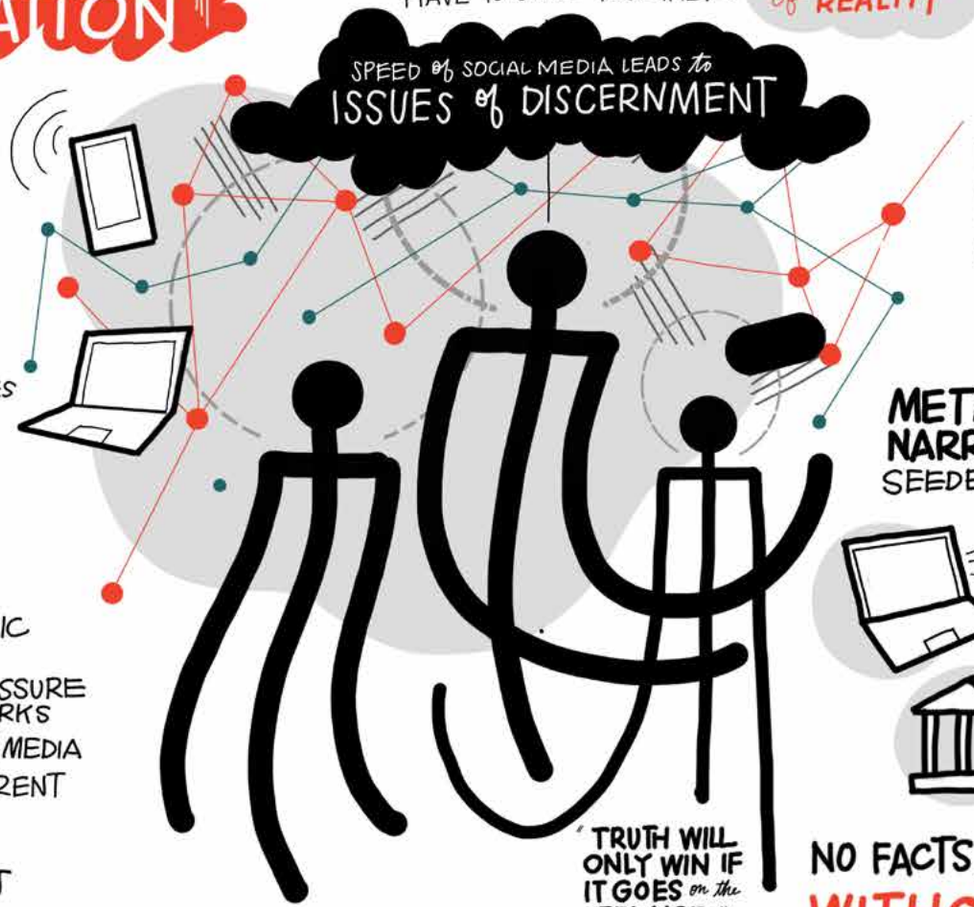
MISINFORMATION and DISINFORMATION

- SPEED WITH WHICH INFORMATION MOVES ONLINE HAS ACCELERATED SO MUCH THAT IT HAS GIVEN FALSITY an ADVANTAGE OVER TRUTH
- WE DON'T ALL EXPERIENCE a COMMON TRANSPARENT INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM
- THE CONSEQUENCES ARE MAGNIFIED BECAUSE OUR LIVES ARE SO INTERDEPENDENT

FAST and SLOW THINKING HAVE TO COME TOGETHER

WE DON'T HAVE a SHARED UNDERSTANDING of REALITY

SPEED of SOCIAL MEDIA LEADS to ISSUES of DISCERNMENT



"TRUTH WILL ONLY WIN IF IT GOES on the OFFENSE."

WHAT WORKS?

- FOCUS on the MOST PROLIFIC OFFENDERS OVER TIME
- DOMAIN REGULATORY PRESSURE and PUBLIC PRESSURE WORKS
- INVEST in RESEARCHERS & MEDIA
- EXPERIMENT with DIFFERENT DESIGN APPROACHES
- BEAR WITNESS and HOLD POWER TO ACCOUNT
- AMPLIFY PLURALISM

POWER

ASSYMETRY in INFORMATION SPACE

MANY ISSUES TO ADDRESS AROUND SYNTHETIC MEDIA..

TOP DOWN PROPOGANDA

BOTTOM-UP EXPONENTIAL ATTACKS

an INVISIBLE VIRUS of LIES…

META NARRATIVES SEEDED on PLATFORMS

ADMIT IT! DON'T TREAT ALL DATA EQUALLY

BY WATERING FACTS DOWN WE ALLOW LIES to SPREAD FASTER

THE ARCHITECTURE of DISTRIBUTION is the PROBLEM…

TAKE REAL WORLD LAWS INTO DIGITAL SPACE

MANIPULATION

- AUDIO is a BIGGER ISSUE THAN VIDEO
- ASSURANCE OF RELIABILITY is KEY
- WE HAVE TO BE PROTECTED FROM MANIPULATION

WHO DECIDES and HOW?

- 5 Ws
- EVALUATING OUTLETS & AUTHORS OVER TIME
- DIGITAL VERIFICATION of VIDEO and AUDIO
- FOCUS on WHO HAS ACCESS to / CONTROL of DATA
- OPINION & BIAS ARE NOT THE ENEMY… DISHONESTY & FALSITY ARE
- DESIGN INTERVENTIONS THAT SLOW THE PACE of SHARING

NO FACTS, NO TRUTH, NO TRUST.

WITHOUT TRUST, NOTHING is POSSIBLE

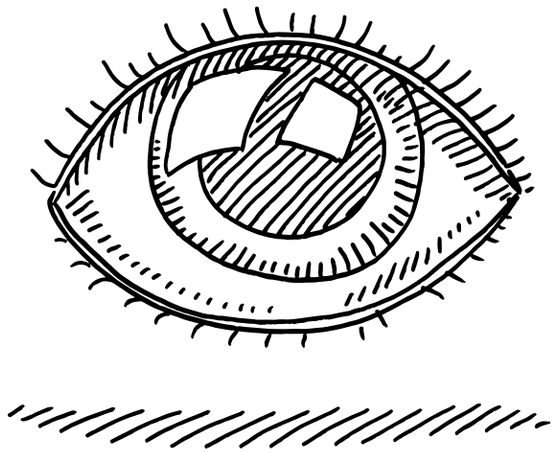
PANEL WATCH VIDEO

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY

Online privacy and security remain at odds. Who decides what data to protect?

The world is facing what Sinan Aral calls a "transparency paradox." On one side is the necessity for researchers and the public to know what's going on under the hood of platforms. They want to know where data originates, how accurate it is, and what it's used for.

At the same time, there's a critical need to safeguard individual data privacy and security. With unprecedented amounts of data about individuals and about society, how can we balance these two needs?



HOLDING THEM ACCOUNTABLE

The experts on the "Ensuring Transparency" panel agreed that Facebook, in particular, must be held accountable for not freely releasing data to researchers and users.

Carole Cadwalladr, the London-based journalist who broke the story of Cambridge Analytica profiting from sharing Facebook data, believes that the social media giant is the only one protecting its privacy today. "Journalists and the public are out-gunned in our ability to get data and answers from Facebook," said Cadwalladr.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal initially sparked calls to reform Facebook and other platforms, yet the public soon lost interest. When the Federal Trade Commission fined Facebook $5 billion for anticompetitive practices, the company's share price actually rose. Cadwalladr argues that sustained pressure and penalties must be levied on social media companies to hold them accountable for their actions.

BETTER DATA ACCESS

Researchers and data scientists continue to express frustration over the lack of data access to major platforms. Kate Starbird, an associate professor at the University of Washington, notes that one company is making its data more available. "We are able to review data patterns on Twitter because their data is public," she said. "Facebook and YouTube do not readily share data and we can't study them very well."

Starbird says that Facebook is making attempts to share data with tools such as CrowdTangle, which allows publishers to track how content spreads around the web. Yet she believes not enough is being done to lift the veil. She would like to see tools that offer more algorithmic transparency so that researchers could examine the peer-to-peer sharing of misinformation and other trends. "This would help us understand malicious use and prevent it," she said.

But opening platforms to scientific study has been problematic for many research universities, since only legislation can force platforms to share data. Nate Persily, a professor at Stanford Law School, suggests offering platforms incentives such as legal immunity so that researchers can look under the hood.

John Markoff, an affiliate fellow at Stanford HAI, seconds that notion. "It's been two decades and here we are—corporations can't self-police," Markoff said. "We need robust legislation."

PANELISTS READ BIOS

Carole Cadwalladr
AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST
THE OBSERVER

Nate Persily
PROFESSOR
STANFORD LAW SCHOOL

John Markoff
AFFILIATE FELLOW
STANFORD HAI

Kate Starbird
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

> "It's been two decades and here we are—corporations can't self-police. We need robust legislation."
>
> JOHN MARKOFF

SOLUTIONS

5. Give researchers access to more data, using technologies such as differential privacy and institutional mechanisms, like data safe harbors.
6. Offer platforms incentives, like legal immunity, to share more data with researchers.
7. Create independent panels to oversee research funding by platforms.
8. Require robust legislative remedies to anticompetitive platform practices.

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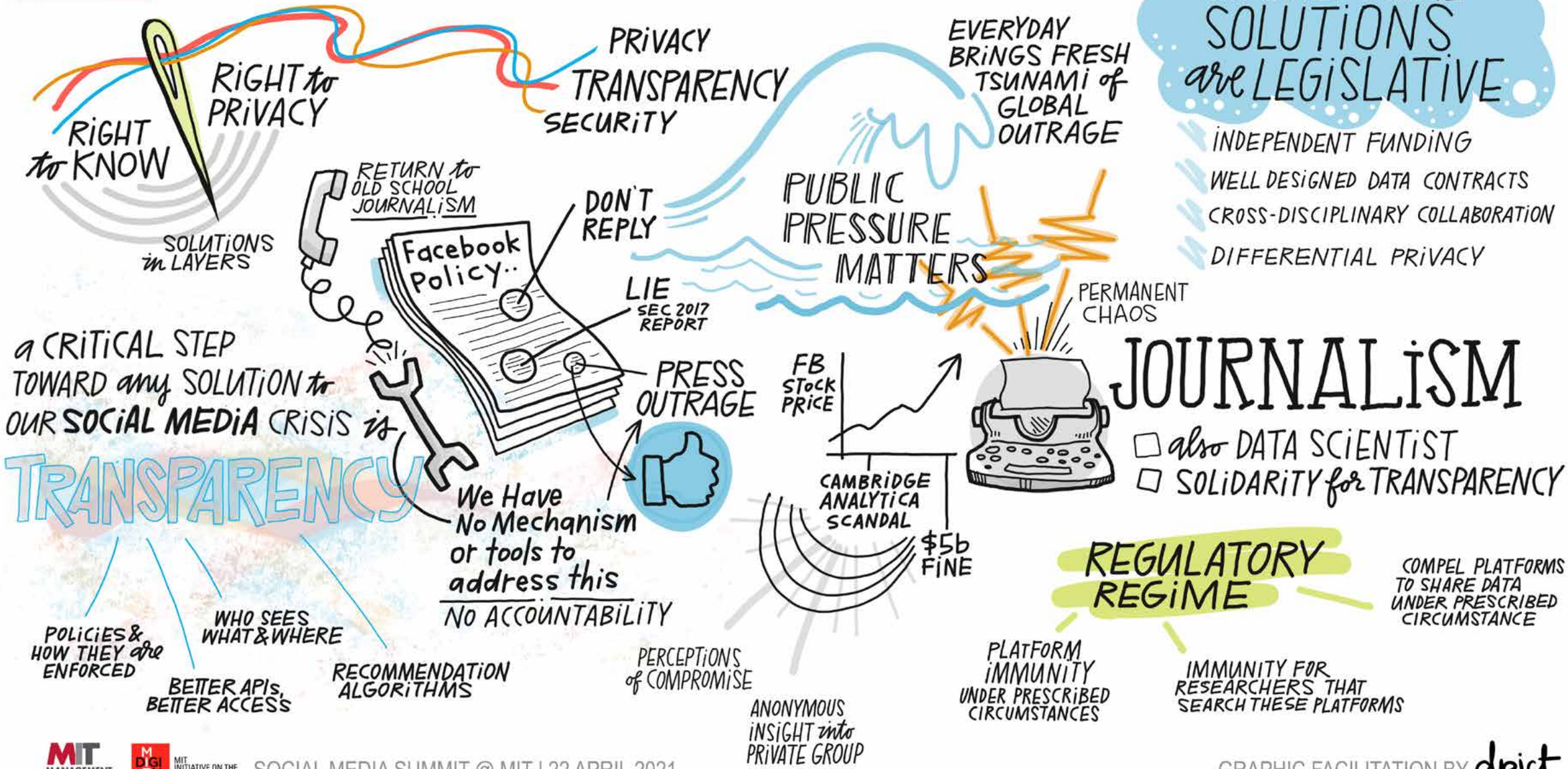
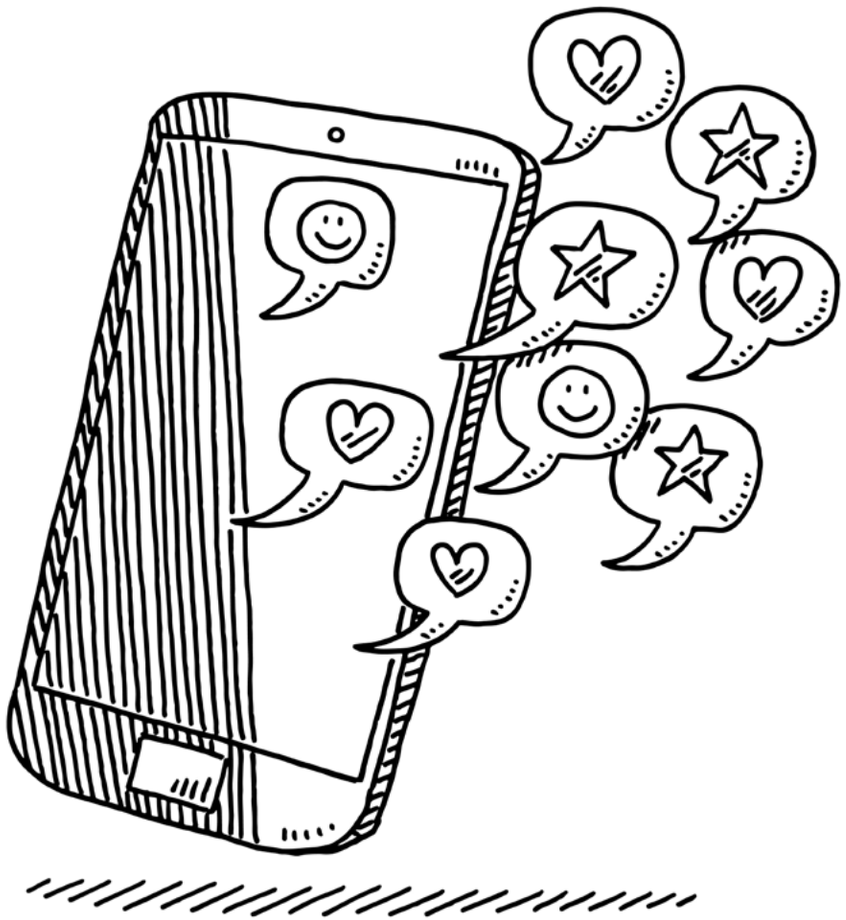
ENSURING TRANSPARENCY



FIRESIDE CHAT

WATCH VIDEO



FACEBOOK SEES ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Facebook's VP of Global Affairs says the company is working to combat hate speech and other issues.

Nick Clegg
VICE PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS AND COMMUNICATIONS, FACEBOOK

Sinan Aral
DIRECTOR, MIT IDE

Facebook VP of Global Affairs Nick Clegg joined Sinan Aral to discuss several topics, including the need for social media regulation, changing geopolitical influences, and algorithm transparency.

Clegg, who previously held the post of deputy prime minister of the U.K., said that Facebook is working to address hate speech and problematic political news on the platform. He admitted that the company can do more to make data available to researchers while protecting user privacy.

He also agrees that independent oversight is needed and notes that in some cases, Facebook is already inviting external scrutiny of its practices. "We're way beyond the stale debate of whether we need new rules of the road" said Clegg. "Of course, we need to update 25-year-old regulations."

Those regulations include Section 230 of the U.S. Communications Decency Act, which provides immunity for website platforms from third-party content. Clegg believes that reform should focus on how to regulate platforms at a national level without what he calls "balkanizing the global internet." Yet he wonders if regulation is possible without destroying what's free about the internet.

Regulatory issues are more difficult than many assume, Clegg noted, especially in a time of political "de-globalization and polarization." For example, China has made massive advances in AI without the angst about bots, data use, and privacy. It's a model that might be attractive to some nations as they build out their internet presence. Clegg also hopes the West will include India—a country that has a huge, nascent social media market and a strong central government—in its global thinking. "The future of internet governance will be decided in India," he said.

Clegg suggests two starting points in the effort to moderate content: establish community standards and aggressively remove illegal content.

Facebook currently employs 35,000 people to moderate content and address appeals. The company also uses AI to filter and block false content. "But we can be held to even more stringent rules," he said. "We publish our own data every 12 weeks, but that's not the same as an independent audit."

While there's general consensus that illegal content, such as sexual exploitation, must be removed from social media sites, Clegg says that content slips through the cracks and you end up "playing endless whack-a-mole."

The VP suggests that platforms could possibly earn immunity to legal liability if they prove they've taken all possible steps to squash illegal content. "This would put pressure on Silicon Valley companies to make systems as effective, resourced, and transparent as possible."

Even so, an independent statutory body—not the FTC or FCC—would have to vet whether the company's are meeting guidelines.

SOLUTIONS

9 Create collaborative global institutions where discussions about governance can take place.

10 Establish independent U.S. statutory bodies—not the FTC or FCC—to vet compliance with guidelines.

11 Offer platforms 'earned immunity' from civil liability, e.g. under Section 230, if they comply with content moderation regulations.

PANEL WATCH VIDEO

REVIVING COMPETITION

Antitrust is just one of the ways to open up social media to new players.

Sinan Aral opened the discussion by noting that competition is the biggest incentive that the platforms have to change. The panelists agreed that there is clear market concentration in the social economy when you consider Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Business practices, including mergers and acquisitions, API access, and data access, all affect competition as well.

BREAK IT UP

Zephyr Teachout is a vocal advocate for breaking up Big Tech. The assistant professor of law at Fordham Law School wants to see state and federal antitrust cases pending against Facebook renewed. Teachout cited a number of reasons to reopen the cases, including the mergers of Instagram and WhatsApp, the company's anti-competitive policies around API access, and information leaked from Facebook employees. "We're dealing with an array of issues," she said, "including concentration that is choking off innovation, harming advertisers and small businesses, and leading to less competition for quality and privacy."

Teachout also noted that the infrastructure of tech firms is being driven or funded by a business model that amplifies high-conflict content. She sees the need to curb the industry's excessive political and lobbying power. "Just a handful of people really control the communications infrastructure in our country," she said.

Tapping into traditional tools, such as horizontal breakups (Facebook and Instagram) and vertical breakups (Google and Google Maps), might help keep companies in line, Teachout added.

INTEROPERABILITY AND DATA PORTABILITY

Joshua Gans, a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, offers alternative approaches to keeping Big Tech in check: Network interoperability and data portability.

Gans believes that interoperability—that is, when different networks are able to accept services from other systems—can effectively address market domination. For example, it would allow users to leave Facebook for a better product without losing their current network connections.

While this scenario is technically feasible, it would require extending the internal protocols for interpersonal communication. "If we have the will to establish technical regulations that will open up networks, it can be achieved," said Gans. Implementing a three-pronged attack of interoperability, recognizing the consumer's voice and needs, and reconsidering advertising dynamics, can yield results without forcing firms to break apart, he said.

THE EU ROADMAP

Marietje Schaake offered a roadmap to promote healthier competition based on proposals in the European Union. Schaake is the international policy director at Stanford University's Cyber Policy Center and served as a member of the European Parliament for a decade. She explained that the Digital Markets Act (DMA) is one of several legislative proposals by the European Commission designed to promote fairness in the digital economy and dictate corporate responsibilities for noncompliance.

"The DMA tries to address two problems: high barriers to entry and anti-competitive practices," said Schaake. The act, which could be implemented as early as 2023, proposes ex ante rules that would preemptively constrain operators before bad behavior occurs. For instance, penalties of up to 10 percent of annual revenue could be imposed on companies for noncompliance, while repeat offenders could face breakup.

Other sanctions, such as removing violators from approved government contractor lists or imposing personal liability for board members, should also be considered, said Schaake.

In April 2021, the European Commission fined Facebook €110 million for misinformation surrounding its 2014 takeover of WhatsApp. Schaake noted that all too often fines like these are seen by big corporations as the cost of doing business.

FUELING MARKET INNOVATION

As a venture capitalist, Albert Wenger puts a premium on market innovation. Social media interoperability and programmability are two means to that end.

To Wenger, a managing partner at Union Square Ventures, programmability means that any third party can create a service that works with another. "We would like others to innovate on top of Facebook's huge social reach and create innovative services without having to ask Facebook for permission," he said.

Wenger believes that programmability will be "the most powerful thing we can do to shift power from the existing networks" for both end users and the marketplace. It can also allow the marketplace—not the government—to intervene.

PANELISTS READ BIOS

Joshua Gans
PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Marietje Schaake
INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIRECTOR, STANFORD CYBER POLICY CENTER

Zephyr Teachout
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
FORDHAM LAW SCHOOL

Albert Wenger
MANAGING PARTNER
UNION SQUARE PARTNERS

> "Just a handful of people really control the communications infrastructure in our country."
>
> ZEPHYR TEACHOUT

SOLUTIONS

12 Break up big companies, starting with Facebook.

13 Legislate interoperability as well as social network and data portability.

14 Emulate EU proposals for stricter anti-competitive penalties to deter corporate misbehavior.

15 Create programmability with the major platforms to encourage innovation.

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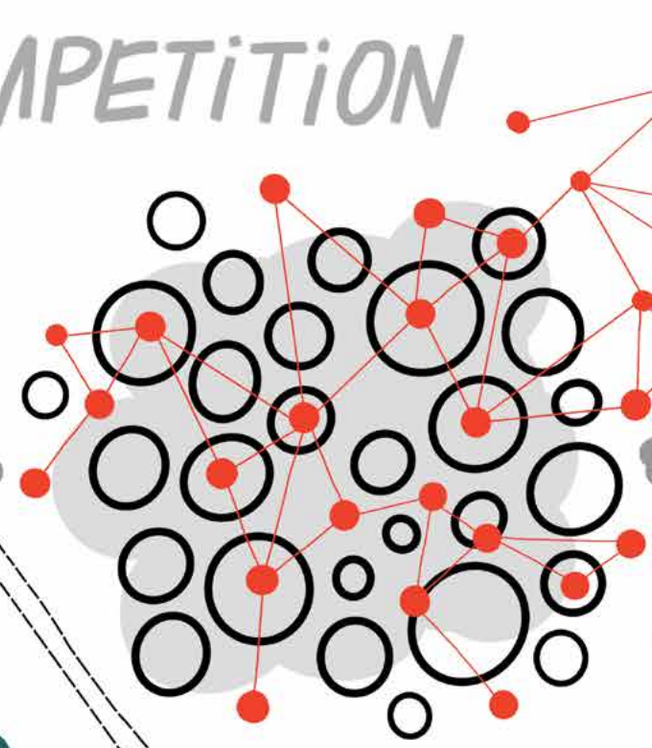
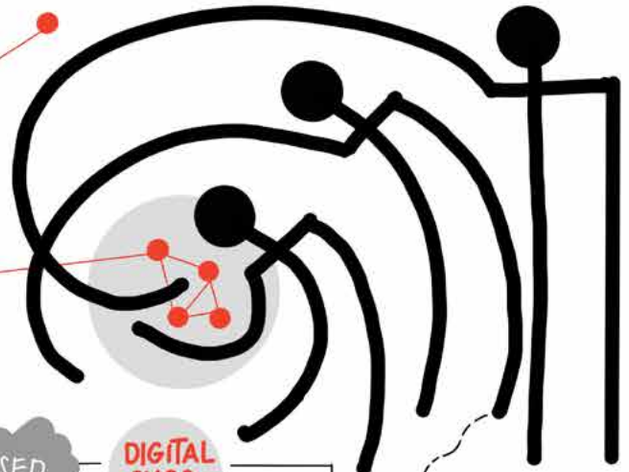
REVIVING COMPETITION

MARKET CONCENTRATION

NETWORK EFFECTS

BUSINESS PRACTICES





PROPOSED

DIGITAL SVCS ACT

AI LAW

DIGITAL MARKETS ACT

- SPELLS OUT WHAT is REQUIRED
- HIGHLIGHTS OTHER MARKET TOOLS
- ADDRESSES HIGH BARRIERS to ENTRY & ANTI-COMPETITIVE BEHAVIOR
- TRIES TO GO FURTHER THAN WHAT ANTI TRUST LAWS DO & TO DO IT BEFORE POSSIBLE VIOLATIONS TAKE PLACE

LICENSING – REMOVAL FROM TRUSTED LISTS OF GOVTS

PERSONAL LIABILITY of BOARD MEMBERS

APIs | GIVE US POWER, AGENCY...

WHO HAS AGENCY in the ECOSYSTEM?

REGULATION CAN HELP REBALANCE POWER ASSYMETRY

WE HAVE TO CHANGE POWER DYNAMICS...

INTEROP. WILL NOT WORK ALONE...

TRADITIONAL TOOLS

- HORIZONTAL
- VERTICAL
- COMMON CARRIAGE
- INTEROPERABILITY

NEXT GEN LAWS WILL ADDRESS WAYS OF DETERMINING DOMINANCE in the MARKET.

alt.

TOOLS LIKE AD BLOCK... EMPOWERED the USER

PROGRAMMABILITY

ALLOWS 3RD PARTY to CREATE SERVICES THAT PRODUCE INTEROPERABILITY

BREAK 'EM UP!

- CHOKING OFF INNOVATION
- LESS COMPETITION
- PROBLEM of a BUSINESS MODEL
- PROBLEM OF POLITICAL POWER
- FEUDALISM IN JOURNALISTIC SPHERE
- GATEKEERS OF INFORMATION

SHIFT POWER

WHAT MECHANISMS DO WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE THESE PRODUCTS IMPROVE?

NOT CLEAR IF THIS SOLVES THE PROBLEM...

- ✓ INTEROPERABILITY
- ✓ VOICE } REGULAR RESPONSIVENESS TO RULE CHANGES
- ✓ AGGRESSIVE ANTI TRUST IN ADVERTISING MARKETS

MIT MANAGEMENT SLOAN SCHOOL

MIT INITIATIVE ON THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT | 22 APRIL 2021

GRAPHIC FACILITATION BY dpict.

PANEL WATCH VIDEO

HUMANIZING DESIGN

Fixing AI and social media design flaws begins with recognizing underlying problems.

The way humans design AI-based platforms and the algorithms that fuel them is driving social media's impact on society. "We need to consider that these algorithms relate to myriad crises and outcomes in our society, including bias, racism, polarization, amplification of hatred, and violence," Sinan Aral said. "They are not the only cause, but we're seeing effects on intermediate outcomes as a result of their design."

Safiya Noble, co-founder of the Center for Critical Internet Inquiry at UCLA, emphasized that social media and search engines are large-scale advertising platforms that have become a proxy for how we organize and access information and knowledge. She noted that the companies that run them are interested in a "profit imperative that has nothing to do with democracy, civil rights, human rights, and broader issues of justice and fairness in our societies." The problem with prioritizing return on investment at all costs is that the people who are most vulnerable are exploited for a tremendous profit, she added.

Noble, who authored the book, *Algorithms of Oppression*, said it's not enough to diversify software engineering teams by race and gender. "We also need to diversify the entire engineering core to include people who understand society, including social scientists, cognitive scientists, and people trained in different types of histories and different perspectives."

EMBRACE FRICTION

Renée Richardson Gosline, a principal research scientist at MIT, sees promise in the use of behavioral psychology and the human-algorithm relationship to redesign the algorithms at the core of social media technology. "Human-centered design sounds really nice," she said, "but in practice, we have more work to do."

One huge obstacle, Gosline noted, is reducing the appetite for systems that are frictionless. "When everything is so easy and so fast, users can re-blog, retweet, and make statements that support many of the negative outputs of social media without enough thought. Designers build systems that harness this automatic thinking way too much."

Gosline recommends slowing online interactions to give users the chance to think before sharing false news or trusting unknown sources. She suggests rethinking our orientation toward human cognition and frictionless experiences. Instead, we should embrace friction wherever and whenever possible.

PROMOTING THE POSITIVE

As former director at MoveOn, Eli Pariser helped pioneer the concept of online citizen engagement. In his role as CEO of Upworthy, Pariser wants to use social media and viral content to promote positive democratic purposes.

His current focus is on viewing social media in terms of spaces where new digital communities can flourish. "When we look at space as a metaphor, especially urban public spaces, we start to see a lot of the same challenges online and offline," said Pariser. These challenges, he noted, can include issues around inclusion and exclusion, policing, and how strangers relate to each other. "The conversation can't be about how we make Facebook or Google or Twitter the right shape to do these public functions.'

Pariser added that it's not the job of Facebook or Google to serve everyone equally. Instead, he emphasizes the need to create new online institutions to create what he calls "healthy pluralistic, equitable, digital experiences."

PRODUCT SAFETY NEEDED

As an early investor and member of Facebook's leadership team, Roger McNamee has seen "a very different reality emerge" since he was there.

A founding partner at Elevation Partners, McNamee acknowledges that societal needs have become lost in the race to succeed. "When it comes to platforms that operate at a national or global scale, policy must precede design."

McNamee supports platform regulation and accountability, as well as product safety that holds engineers, executives, and corporations responsible for any harm they may cause. He also proposes a certification process for social media designers.

Facebook's own data shows that 64 percent of people who join extremist Facebook groups do so because of the platform's recommendations. "You cannot allow companies whose business interests conflict with public health and democracy to control the environment in which the country deliberates things like public health and democracy," McNamee said. He added that the insurrection of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, was predominantly organized on Facebook. "Tweaking algorithms isn't going to fix this," he added.

The social media status quo isn't inevitable, McNamee said. "There are so many valid and productive uses of social media, AI, and other technologies that are being buried because surveillance capitalism creates attractive economics."

Pariser agrees that algorithms allow bad behavior to be normalized. "There are plenty of opportunities to create new ways of mediating conversation, but it's really hard to do that if you're also chasing hockey-stick growth."

PANELISTS READ BIOS

Safiya Noble
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR/CO-FOUNDER, CENTER FOR CRITICAL INTERNET INQUIRY AT UCLA

Renée Richardson Gosline
PRINCIPAL RESEARCH SCIENTIST, MIT SLOAN

Eli Pariser
CO-FOUNDER UPWORTHY

Roger McNamee
FOUNDING PARTNER ELEVATION PARTNERS

> "Human-centered design sounds really nice, but in practice, we have more work to do."
>
> RENÉE RICHARDSON GOSLINE

SOLUTIONS

16 Diversify the engineering core to include social scientists, cognitive scientists, and people trained in different types of histories.

17 Create ethics certification programs and degrees for AI designers.

18 Embrace friction to reduce the automatic nature of information diffusion and interactions with AI.

19 Regulate platforms for product safety; hold designers and companies accountable for the products they design and deploy.

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

HUMANIZING DESIGN

DISCRIMINATION in SOCIAL MEDIA, SEARCH & ETC...

MANIFESTATION of BROADER LOGIC

INVESTMENT IMPERATIVE

BUSINESS MODEL

DIGITAL VOODOO!

NARROWING PERSONAL CHOICES

DECOUPLING FROM OUR CHOICES

in TECH DESIGN PROCEEDS EVERYTHING

WHAT if WE START with POLICY?

QUANTIFY HARM?

REGULATE

DO NO HARM to

consumers
civil rights
human rights
democracy
...
...

BUSINESS INTEREST

'NO CONFLICT' POLICY

PUBLIC HEALTH & DEMOCRACY

BUSINESS MODELS SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED to IGNORE HARM

PERSONALIZED REALITIES ...

What doors might open?

'THE ALGORITHM MADE DO IT'
-Human

NEW PUBLIC SPACE

(SPACE)

TRUST ARCHITECTURE

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

ESSENTIAL in PHYSICAL COMMUNITIES

HEALTHY PUBLIC DEBATE

THINGS THAT MATTER TO US MOST

SAFETY FIRST
BAN BEHAVIORAL ADVERTISING
REGULATION-LAST RESORT
CERTIFICATION
PRODUCT SAFETY STANDARDS

Time for BOLD PUBLIC imagination

DESIGNERS:
BROADEN THE EXPERTISE

all sites of intervention

Data Sets

Systems Level Analysts

Platforms

Algorithms

Diversify Engineers

Experts in Society

Gender Studies

Historian

Black Studies

American Indian Studies

Behavioral Scientist

AUTOMATIC THINKING

What I did vs. what I thought I did

WHAT DO OUR ACTIONS LOOK LIKE?

click

Beautiful BENEFITS of FRICTIONS

PRACTICE acts OF INCONVENIENCE

MIT MANAGEMENT SLOAN SCHOOL

MIT INITIATIVE ON THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT | 22 APRIL 2021

GRAPHIC FACILITATION BY dpict.

PANEL WATCH VIDEO

ENLIGHTENING BUSINESS MODELS

Proposals to change social media business models include subscriptions, new ad offerings, and harsher penalties.

Social media business models are increasingly becoming a root cause of many crises, says Sinan Aral. He believes that the attention economy—defined by social platforms that sell our attention as ad inventory to brands, governments, and NGOs—is "unbelievably effective" but asks if it's doing good and if not, what would replace this model?

THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Scott Galloway, an adjunct professor of marketing at the New York University Stern School of Business, says the attention economy has to change. He has long argued for a subscription-based social media business model that isn't tied to advertising—one that would allow businesses to own the relationship with the end consumer in a more consumer-centric way.

Galloway cites Neeva, a startup subscription search engine that "isn't incentivized to take you to another place it can further monetize or enrage you, but to take you to the best content possible." He believes a healthier search ecosystem will emerge when alternatives like Neeva are more widely available.

He also acknowledges that a segment of society doesn't want—or can't afford—social media subscriptions. "There is a danger that if the best, most fact-checked, edited, credible, and high-veracity news is behind a paywall, it may create even a more dangerous bifurcation of economic inequality."

Guy Kawasaki, chief evangelist at Canva and host of the Remarkable People podcast, says that subscription models are attractive by design but notes that "if they truly filtered out ads, many people would pay for that."

While it's easy to point out the shortfalls of social media, Kawasaki says that small businesses all over the world rely on it for customer targeting. "If you're a real estate firm in Santa Cruz, California, and you want to advertise a new listing to people who live in Santa Cruz, are older than 25, and have a particular background, how will it do that if you destroy Facebook? There's a reason why people pay Facebook for advertising: because it works."

But will Facebook ever adopt a subscription model? Galloway doesn't think so, since there's no financial incentive. He agreed with his fellow panelists that fines imposed to date have been far too low to discourage self-regulation.

TESTING NEW MODELS

Other models are being tested, such as premium and "freemium" models that feature some ad-free content with the option to pay more for superior service. There's also the fan model, which charges users to subscribe to the feeds of other users, and social media platforms take a percentage of the subscriptions.

Data scientist and entrepreneur Hilary Mason likes these ideas, but notes just because you're paying to follow a creator doesn't mean the creator is not amplifying or disseminating problematic content. Mason, who is the founder of technology startup Fast Forward Labs, believes that social media ventures should step away from monolithic social platforms like Facebook. "They should try to break down the products we'd like to see, and where to actually find value," she said.

Many companies are attempting to create positive technology business models that connect us rather than tear us apart. Affectiva, a company that specializes in facial and emotion recognition, is one such firm.

CEO Rana El Kaliouby believes that Affectiva's technology can promote beneficial outcomes, such as detecting driver distraction, fatigue, and lack of attention. "We've been routinely approached by intelligence agencies and governments that want to apply our technology for surveillance, security, or lie detection," she said. "We have turned down hundreds of millions of dollars where we just felt that this is not in line with our core values." El Kaliouby notes that Affectiva carefully considers bias and privacy infringements, too.

THE PERP WALK

NYU's Galloway wants to elevate corporate ethics to the point where platform executives who don't behave in the public interest are charged criminally. He calls for a so-called "perp walk" of corporate offenders who knowingly lied to Congress and who knew that their platforms would likely be weaponized to pervert democracy.

Galloway believes that the antitrust tide may be shifting with the Biden administration and a growing anti-tech public sentiment. "I'm more hopeful that we're going to see actual, tangible antitrust legislation," he said.

El Kaliouby hopes that consumers will vote to use one platform over another based on ethical standards. She also believes that investors should hold businesses accountable on the ethical development and deployment of technology, as well as on matters of diversity and inclusion.

PANELISTS READ BIOS

Rana El Kaliouby
CEO
AFFECTIVA

Scott Galloway
PROFESSOR
NYU STERN SCHOOL

Guy Kawasaki
CHIEF EVANGELIST, CANVA & HOST, REMARKABLE PEOPLE PODCAST

Hilary Mason
CO-FOUNDER, HIDDEN DOOR & FOUNDER, FAST FORWARD LABS

> "There's a reason why people pay Facebook for advertising: because it works."
>
> GUY KAWASAKI

SOLUTIONS

20 Develop new business models including subscription and freemium models.

21 Tie consequences of legal violations directly to corporate executives, not just their companies.

22 Strengthen regulations by adding taxes, such as programmatic media taxes, to deter algorithmic amplification.

23 Ensure that users consent to data use; protect data privacy.

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

ENLIGHTENING BUSINESS MODELS

CAN WE REENGINEER the SOCIAL ECONOMY TOWARDS MORE PRODUCTIVE GOALS?

BASED ON "ENGAGEMENT" aka **RAGE**
(THAT'S WHAT ENGAGES PEOPLE THE MOST...)

INCENDIARY CONTENT draws most attention

WE NEED TO **CELEBRATE CONSCIENCE** and SYSTEMITIZE IT.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR JUSTICE, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO FIND IT in CAPITALISM and PRICING AROUND MEDIA

CONSUMERS VOTE WITH THEIR FEET... COMPETITION HAS TO BE ADDRESSED and INVESTORS

WE NEED TO ROW in the SAME DIRECTION

INCENTIVES

HOW CAN YOU ADDRESS ISSUE OF INEQUALITY?

SUBSCRIPTION MODEL

BUSINESS MODELS

CREATOR / FAN MODEL

SUBSTACK, ETc...
NEW DYNAMICS TO CONSIDER

META FILTERS
$5 ONE TIME PAYMENT, REGULATED

SUFFERING THE IMPLICATIONS OF OPTIMIZING for SCALE and EXTRACTIVE ECONOMICS

DRIVING REVENUE

STRUCTURAL GUARDRAILS
TRANSPARENCY of CONSENT
ACKNOWLEDGMENT of PERSONAL NATURE of DATA
REBALANCE POWER ASSYMETRY

VALUES

RISE OF THE **EMPATHY ECONOMY**

GOOGLE & FACEBOOK
LARGEST CORP. TAX
BREAKING THEM UP WOULD HELP...

90% of MARKET SHARE... WE DON'T LET THIS HAPPEN

"the worm has turned..."

ANTITRUST

IF FEE HAD BEEN $50B, THINGS WOULD GET REAL...

TAX ALGORITHMS OF AMPLIFICATION

THOUGHTFUL REGULATION

REGULATE INPUTS or OUTPUTS?

WE NEED a PERP WALK
(THE ALGEBRA OF DETERRENCE)

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PANEL WATCH VIDEO

RESTORING SPEECH

The First Amendment meets the digital era—and so the battles begin.

The First Amendment is a cornerstone of U.S. democracy, yet Sinan Aral believes there is a need to draw lines between free and harmful speech in the age of social media.

At the center of the debate is Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which provides immunity for website platforms from third-party content. Section 230, which has roots well before the advent of the internet, also must police companies and individuals that distribute speech others have created, such as bookstores or newsstands.

Jeff Kosseff, an assistant professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, has written extensively about the legislation. He notes that when online services such as Prodigy and CompuServe emerged in the early 1990s with new business models, Congress and the courts took notice and overhauled telecommunications laws.

In 1996, Congress passed Section 230, which treats interactive computer services differently than publishers and exempted them from liability—or at least that's how the courts interpreted it. "Section 230 has created very broad protections," says Kosseff— protections that generally favor giant platforms.

NO ABSOLUTE RIGHTS

Richard Stengel, former managing editor of TIME, isn't certain that America needs a hate speech law as much as it needs a hate speech debate. "The First Amendment is not an absolute right to free speech," said Stengel, who served as an under secretary of state for Public Affairs and Diplomacy. "There are many examples of speech that is not protected, such as false advertising, violations of copyright, and child pornography."

At the same time, Stengel says that Section 230 needs to be reformed to make platforms more liable for the content that they publish. "Regulation has to incentivize platforms to take responsibility for illegal content just as *TIME* magazine was," he said. "I would argue that they actually want to be regulated because they don't like being in that gray area of subjective decisions. They want to be able to say, 'The government made me do this.'"

Yaël Eisenstat, a Future of Democracy Fellow at the Berggruen Institute and researcher-in-residence at Betalab, noted that society must understand the difference between speech and the way a social media company handles that speech. Eisentstat, who also served as a CIA officer and global head of elections integrity operations at Facebook, believes that while content moderation is important, there are other things to consider. "The bigger issue is really about the tools that the platform companies are using, as well as the intentional business decisions that platforms make on what to enforce, and when to enforce their policies," she said.

Accountability is also a pressing issue. Recommendation engines often lead users down a political path, yet users are often blamed for their actions without considering that they are vulnerable to online manipulation. "No accountability exists right now for this industry," Eisenstat noted. "But if they are not acting as legal and good stewards of democracy, there should be mechanisms to hold them accountable."

Eisenstat says if we want to promote a healthy democracy, we should argue and debate, but we shouldn't be served totally different versions of paid political speech. "Courts are over-interpreting Section 230 to give Facebook a free pass," she added.

SPEECH AND REACH

Should free speech be limited in its reach, especially if the content is potentially misleading or harmful?

Renée Diresta, research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, first wrote about the distinction between "speech and reach" in 2018 when social media had reduced barriers—first for creation of content and then for dissemination of content. As content proliferated, recommendation engines and other algorithmic curators began to filter content in ways that incentivized users to engage or remain on the platform. Now, deliberate user engagement and inadvertent algorithmic amplification pose new dilemmas.

"There's always been this division between your right to speak and your right to have a megaphone that reaches hundreds of millions of people," said Diresta. "There's value to being able to express your anti-vaccine views, but the platform doesn't necessarily need to boost it."

Diresta suggests designing interventions in the UX, such as graying the share button until a user views all content or clicks on a URL. She also recommends that fact checkers perform their work earlier in order to assess misleading or malicious content before it goes viral.

PANELISTS READ BIOS

Renée Diresta
RESEARCH MANAGER
STANFORD INTERNET OBSERVATORY

Jeff Kosseff
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
US NAVAL ACADEMY

Yaël Eisenstat
FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY FELLOW,
THE BERGGRUEN INSTITUTE
RESEARCHER-IN-RESIDENCE, BETALAB

Richard Stengel
FORMER UNDERSECRETARY OF STATE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS & DIPLOMACY & FORMER MANAGING EDITOR OF TIME MAGAZINE

> "There's always been this division between your right to speak and your right to have a megaphone that reaches hundreds of millions of people."
>
> RENÉE DIRESTA

SOLUTIONS

24 Distinguish between speech and reach--the right to speech and the right to amplification of that speech.

25 Limit corporate lobbying; enforce stricter campaign finance rules.

SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

RESTORING SPEECH

ENACTMENT VS. PRESERVATION OF DEMOCRACY

FREE SPEECH is NOT an UNQUALIFIED RIGHT

POLICY
DESIGN
EDUCATION
CONSIDER the USER

FRICTION

- ACCURACY NUDGES
- TEMPORARILY THROTTLING SPEED/RESPONSE of SOCIAL MEDIA
- MODERATION
- SELF-REGULATORY
- TAMPING ALGORITHMIC AMPLIFICATION
- LABELS on MATERIALS

DRAW a LINE BETWEEN FREE & HARMFUL SPEECH...

Massive reach was never encompassed in your right to free speech...

ANTI VAX

Conspiracy Amplification

FREE SPEECH IS NOT THE SAME AS FREE REACH

MARKETPLACE of IDEAS

AMERICA NEEDS a HATE-SPEECH DEBATE

WHO UNDERSTANDS THE 1ST AMENDMENT?

WHERE IS THE LINE?
WHO DRAWS THE LINE?
IS THERE a LINE?

EXPERIMENT with the CONSTITUTIONAL EXPERIMENT

Facebook wasn't ready...

Not the government's job to play never ending whack-a-mole

FOR THE SUDDEN ITERATION OF NETWORK ACTIVISM.

COMMUNICATIONS DECENCY ACT

SECTION 230

MODERATION EQUALS LIABILITY and then

REMOVED LIABILITY

230 REFORM?
- PLATFORMS GIVEN PUBLISHER'S LIABILITY

230 REPEALED?

230 OVER-UNDER INTERPRETED

1. CLARIFY the PROBLEM
2. DIALOGUE on REALITIES of MODERATION
   - LOGISTICAL
   - TECHNICAL
   - HUMAN RESOURCES

NO ONE SILVER BULLET

FRICTIONLESS TOOLS are DESTRUCTIVE to DEMOCRACY

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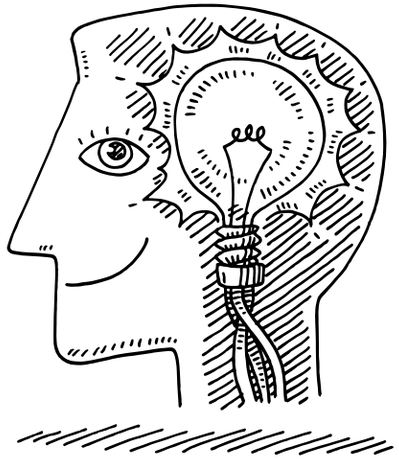

ONWARD

Following a full day of discussion and debate, Sinan Aral offered three calls to action.

- Write to Congress and demand more action.
- Call for a national commission on democracy and technology.
- Spark and convene conversations about social media reform wherever you can.

"Together, we can make inroads toward solving today's problems and heading off new ones."

SINAN ARAL

RECAP

25 SOLUTIONS FROM THE SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

1. Hold platforms accountable for designs that amplify lies.
2. Focus on and shut down prolific disinformation networks.
3. Use content interventions to nudge people toward awareness of falsity and accuracy.
4. Use accuracy nudges to crowdsource falsity labels so that algorithms can be trained to automatically identify lies.
5. Give researchers access to more data using technologies like differential privacy, and institutional mechanisms like data safe harbors.
6. Offer platforms incentives, like legal immunity, to share more data with researchers.
7. Create independent panels to oversee research funding by platforms.
8. Require robust legislative remedies to anticompetitive platform practices.
9. Create collaborative global institutions where discussions about governance can take place.
10. Establish independent U.S. statutory bodies—not the FTC or FCC—to vet compliance with guidelines.
11. Offer platforms 'earned immunity' from civil liability, e.g. under Section 230, if they comply with content moderation regulations.
12. Break up big companies starting with Facebook.
13. Legislate interoperability as well as social network and data portability.
14. Emulate EU proposals for stricter anti-competitive penalties to deter corporate misbehavior.
15. Create programmability with the major platforms to encourage innovation.
16. Diversify the engineering core to include social scientists, cognitive scientists, and people trained in different types of histories.
17. Create ethics certification programs and degrees for AI designers.
18. Embrace friction to reduce the automatic nature of information diffusion and interactions with AI.
19. Regulate platforms for product safety; hold designers and companies accountable for the products they design and deploy.
20. Develop new business models including subscription and freemium models.
21. Tie consequences of legal violations directly to corporate executives, not just their companies.
22. Strengthen regulations by adding taxes, such as programmatic media taxes, to deter algorithmic amplification.
23. Ensure that users consent to data use; protect data privacy.
24. Distinguish between speech and reach--the right to speech and the right to amplification of that speech.
25. Limit corporate lobbying; enforce stricter campaign finance rules.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AT A CROSSROADS

25 SOLUTIONS FROM THE SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT @ MIT

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