Carla Sanchez

REL 254-01

5/19/2022

Essay 5: Institutions

Originally, the developers working in Silicon Valley were highly idealistic. They were people who wanted to impact the systems of oppression that they saw around them. Social media applications today were based on an ideal stemming from that mindset – that technology would push humanity forward into a more empathetic, intelligent future. Many programmers then, some still now, believed that more information equates to more knowledge and that more communication equates to more empathy. Now, living through more than twenty years with the effects that come with our use of these apps, it can be argued that Silicon Valley has so far failed to realize its ideal. What social media has proven to do thus far is exponentially increase our issues of consumerism, apathy and disassociation. If the programmers of then had had more of an animistic, a more tribal mindset, then these applications instead may have been developed for knowing both one another and the world better – they would have remained as tools to cement the ideals of Silcon Valley into reality.

The whole purpose of social media is to connect us with one another. Connect our memories, our futures, our hopes – it's to show who we are, who we were and who we hope to be. The original founders of major social applications today, the tech industry as a whole actually, "[has] a utopian view of the world and of itself..." [1] The many negative effects of social media today, like the increase in teenage depression [2], a decrease of our abilities for focus [3], and the rise of extremist groups [4], were not futures that developers ever envisioned. This twisted mirror of a future may have been brought forth by the philosophical differences between

the charitably impassioned developers and the exploitative demands of domestic Western industry. The great wealth of the West is based on exploitation but as the censure of overt manipulation has increased, as Deloria puts it in *God is Red,* "the creation of wealth today [became] more dependent on new technology than on the exploitation of untapped resources." [5] Though, with emerging new technologies, there *was* a realization of an untapped resource, one that Western industry could abuse for a grander economy – the untapped resource of attention, sourced from the billions of people on this Earth. This realization created an incentive to develop applications for attention retention above all else. Red bubbles, bell chimes, contrasting colors, are all elements to create a perfect environment for users to lose track of both themselves and of their world. Social media lost its purpose as a tool for connecting each of us to one another, instead turning into a reaper of our time, allowing apathy and dissociation to bloom between us.

More information and more communication then, within the parameter of attention retention, did not lead to the future of empathy and knowledge that developers wanted. If attention was not seen as another untapped resource and instead as an earth to grow ideas, to learn based on experience, to be aware of the world around you, then maybe social media would have remained respected as a tool. In animistic, tribal communities, this mindset is cultivated and nurtured throughout all levels of their society. They know that it is only through the threads of awareness that knowledge and empathy can be shown within the complex patterns of the tapestry of experience. The tools we create as humans, although deserving of respect themselves, are only meant to amplify our ability to be aware. It is our gift to tune into our surroundings that helps us grow, it is not the tools themselves. Like the pipe, mentioned in Lame Deer's story *Alone on the Hilltop*, where "the smoke from the peace pipe goes straight up to the spirit world. But this is a two-way thing. Power flows down to us through that smoke, through the pipe stem...that pipe is not just a thing; it is alive." [6] The pipe, the process of smoking, the awareness that comes with

that ritual, all help Lame Deer later receive his vision. After time to interpret and to communicate information from his vision, Lame Deer knew that he would be a worthy medicine man - a person capable of feeling empathy and understanding of people from all walks of life. The pipe did not bring him his visions, what the pipe had done is visually display the values of gifting and reciprocity, of cycles and time. It was maybe because he used the pipe, along with other elements in this ritual, that he was able to amplify his understanding of the systems that surround him and the importance of maintaining them. Through this, Lame Deer grew to become more knowledgeable and more empathetic. Although not inherently physical, social media applications can be our pipe, our amplifiers to create a more interconnected world.

Social media, because of its misuse as a tool, has created more of a fragmented world but, like the pipe and like so many other tools shared in tribal communities, it can give back. Social media apps are tailored to a user's specific habits, tagging their interests and needs. They are inherently dynamic in this way, tracking patterns and constantly adapting to any new interests a user may have. If they could be just as dynamic in a community-based rather than an individualistic way, then maybe the use of social media could achieve more holistic goals. Iterations and cycles are integral to the way people learn in tribal communities; social media algorithms try to do the same. Not everything in tribal communities can be, nor should be, transferred into Western Industry but the value of understanding patterns can be. Apps can start showcasing the topics people in your geographic area are speaking about, posting about. Local blooms and policy changes each have a better chance of showing up on a user's feed than a celebrity in California. Comparison of wealth, status and beauty could dissipate if who you are comparing yourself to is your neighbor, your family. Apps like Facebook and Snapchat already do this with their geo-specific tagging and filter options, but they could infinitesimally improve upon it. Big changes, like adjusting their app designs to become more like a game, like Pokémon

GO with its augmented reality design giving users incentive to explore their local areas [7], could help. But simple tweaks, like introducing post expiration dates, character limitations, and further encouraging geo-specific events into their designs would also achieve the goal of bringing awareness into our use of these apps. The goal here is not to limit users in their use of these apps, but to bring back the awareness of the social utility intrinsic to them. This way the first steps to realizing the ideals of Silicon Valley can be achieved, even if it is a few decades later.

It is critical to acknowledge that social media applications are powerful tools, they are not toys, they are not harmless – it is social media that feeds into our emerging problems of extremism and declining mental health in the West. By incorporating a more tribal perspective through replacing the persuasive techniques that are used to keep users online, features like AutoPlay and InfiniteScroll, with features that could instead bring a user's awareness back to their actions would negate the negative effects we are facing in this age of technology. Tools, virtual or otherwise, deserve to be acknowledged as such. By adopting a more tribal, animistic mindset towards the development of our social media apps, we have a chance to once again be conscious of the world. The ideal that social media could cultivate more empathy and more knowledge into this world is arguably animistic in its nature – it recognizes that social media is a tool and that it is up to us to use, and to design, it with respect. The only thing that we must do as both users and designers is bring it to life.

References

1. "Silicon Valley Idealism at Odds with China Market." *Sg.news.yahoo.com*, sg.news.yahoo.com/silicon-valley-idealism-odds-china-market-014157304--finance.html. Accessed 19 May 2022.
2. Bashir, Hilal, and Shabir Ahmad Bhat. "Effects of Social Media on Mental Health: A Review." *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 3, 30 June 2017, ijip.in/articles/effects-of-social-media-on-mental-health-a-review/, 10.25215/0403.134.
3. Wilmer, Henry H., et al. "Smartphones and Cognition: A Review of Research Exploring the Links between Mobile Technology Habits and Cognitive Functioning." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 605, 25 Apr. 2017, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5403814/, 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00605.
4. Kunst, Jonas R, and Milan Obaidi. "Understanding Violent Extremism in the 21st Century: The (Re)Emerging Role of Relative Deprivation." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 35, Oct. 2020, pp. 55–59, 10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.010.
5. Vine Deloria. *God Is Red*. New York, N.Y. Dell [Ca, 1973.] (Pg.77)
6. Lame, Deer, Richard Erdoes, and Richard Erdoes. Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. Print.(Pg.2)
7. Chamary, J. V. "Why "Pokémon GO" Is the World's Most Important Game." Forbes, www.forbes.com/sites/jvchamary/2018/02/10/pokemon-go-science-health-benefits/?sh=1cb787f53ab0. Accessed 20 May 2022.