The New York Times

How Facebook Warps Our Worlds

By Frank Bruni

May 21, 2016

THOSE who've been raising alarms about Facebook are right: Almost every minute that we spend on our smartphones and tablets and laptops, thumbing through favorite websites and scrolling through personalized feeds, we're pointed toward foregone conclusions. We're pressured to conform.

But unseen puppet masters on Mark Zuckerberg's payroll aren't to blame. We're the real culprits. When it comes to elevating one perspective above all others and herding people into culturally and ideologically inflexible tribes, nothing that Facebook does to us comes close to what we do to ourselves.

I'm talking about how we use social media in particular and the Internet in general — and how we let them use us. They're not so much agents as accomplices, new tools for ancient impulses, part of "a long sequence of technological innovations that enable us to do what we want," noted the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who wrote the 2012 best seller "The Righteous Mind," when we spoke last week.

"And one of the things we want is to spend more time with people who think like us and less with people who are different," Haidt added. "The Facebook effect isn't trivial. But it's catalyzing or amplifying a tendency that was already there."

By "the Facebook effect" he didn't mean the possibility, discussed extensively over recent weeks, that Facebook manipulates its menu of "trending" news to emphasize liberal views and sources. That menu is just one facet of Facebook.

More prevalent for many users are the posts we see from friends and from other people and groups we follow on the network, and this information is utterly contingent on choices we ourselves make. If we seek out, "like" and comment on angry missives from Bernie Sanders supporters, we'll be confronted with more angry missives from more Sanders supporters. If we banish such outbursts, those dispatches disappear.

That's the crucial dynamic, algorithm or whatever you want to call it. That's the trap and curse of our lives online.

The Internet isn't rigged to give us right or left, conservative or liberal — at least not until we rig it that way. It's designed to give us more of the same, whatever that same is: one sustained note from the vast and varied music that it holds, one redundant fragrance from a garden of infinite possibility.

A few years back I bought some scented shower gel from Jo Malone. I made the purchase through the company's website. For months afterward, as I toggled through cyberspace, Jo Malone stalked me, always on my digital heels, forever in a corner of my screen, a Jo Malone candle here, a Jo Malone cologne over there. I'd been profiled and pigeonholed: fan of Jo Malone. Sure, I could choose from woody, citrus, floral and even fruity, but there was no Aramis in my aromatic ecosphere, and I was steered clear of Old Spice.

So it goes with the fiction we read, the movies we watch, the music we listen to and, scarily, the ideas we subscribe to. They're not challenged. They're validated and reinforced. By bookmarking given blogs and personalizing social-media feeds, we customize the news we consume and the political beliefs we're exposed to as never before. And this colors our days, or rather bleeds them of color, reducing them to a single hue.

We construct precisely contoured echo chambers of affirmation that turn conviction into zeal, passion into fury, disagreements with the other side into the demonization of it. Then we marvel at the Twitter mobs that swarm in defense of Sanders or the surreal success of Donald Trump's candidacy, whose historical tagline may well be "All I know is what's on the Internet."

Those were his exact words, a blithe excuse for his mistaken assertion that a protester at one of his rallies had ties to Islamic extremists. He'd seen a video somewhere. He'd chosen to take it at face value. His intelligence wasn't and isn't vetted but viral — and conveniently suited to his argument and needs. With a creative or credulous enough Google search, a self-serving "truth" can always be found, along with a passel of supposed experts to vouch for it and a clique of fellow disciples.

Carnival barkers, conspiracy theories, willful bias and nasty partisanship aren't anything new, and they haven't reached unprecedented heights today. But what's remarkable and sort of heartbreaking is the way they're fed by what should be strides in our ability to educate ourselves. The proliferation of cable television networks and growth of the Internet promised to expand our worlds, not shrink them. Instead they've enhanced the speed and thoroughness with which we retreat into enclaves of the like-minded.

Eli Pariser parsed all of this in his 2011 book "The Filter Bubble," noting how every tap, swipe and keystroke warps what comes next, creating a tailored reality that's closer to fiction. There was subsequent pushback to that analysis, including from scientists at Facebook, who published a peer-reviewed study in the journal Science last year that questioned just how homogeneous a given Facebook user's news feed really was.

But there's no argument that in an era that teems with choice, brims with niche marketing and exalts individualism to the extent that ours does, we're sorting ourselves with a chillingly ruthless efficiency. We've surrendered universal points of reference. We've lost common ground.

"Technology makes it much easier for us to connect to people who share some single common interest," said Marc Dunkelman, adding that it also makes it easier for us to avoid "face-to-face interactions with diverse ideas." He touched on this in an incisive 2014 book, "The Vanishing Neighbor," which belongs with Haidt's work and with "Bowling Alone," "Coming Apart" and "The Fractured Republic" in the literature of modern American fragmentation, a booming genre all its own.

We're less committed to, and trustful of, large institutions than we were at times in the past. We question their wisdom and substitute it with the groupthink of micro-communities, many of which we've formed online, and their sensibilities can be more peculiar and unforgiving.

Facebook, along with other social media, definitely conspires in this. Haidt noted that it often discourages dissent within a cluster of friends by accelerating shaming. He pointed to the enforced political correctness among students at many colleges.

"Facebook allows people to react to each other so quickly that they are really afraid to step out of line," he said.

But that's not about a lopsided news feed. It's not about some sorcerer's algorithm. It's about a tribalism that has existed for as long as humankind has and is now rooted in the fertile soil of the Internet, which is coaxing it toward a full and insidious flower.

Correction: *May 21, 2016*
An earlier version of this article misstated a word in a quote by Jonathan Haidt. Mr. Haidt said the Facebook effect was "catalyzing or amplifying" a tendency already there (not "metabolizing or amplifying").

I invite you to follow me on Twitter (@FrankBruni) and join me on Facebook.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on May 22, 2016, on Page SR3 of the New York edition with the headline: How Facebook Warps Our Worlds