

SPECIAL SECTION

***The Social Dilemma*, by Jeff Orlowski, Netflix, 2020**

Film reviews with section editor's introduction

Editor: Paschal Preston, School of Communication, Dublin City University, Dublin

Review I: The Social Dilemma: A Contradictory Narrative About Platform Power

Robin Mansell, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science

Review II: Missing in Action: Silences and Evasions in The Social Dilemma

Graham Murdock, Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Loughborough University, UK

Review III: Escaping the Matrix or Repeating Liberal (Techno)Solutions?

Eugenia Siapera, Information and Communication Studies, University College Dublin

Review IV: The Social Dilemma's Dilemma: Challenging and Reproducing Social Media Myths

Yuqi Na, CAMRI, University of Westminster

The Social Dilemma: Partial Insights Amidst Fuzzy Frames

Paschal Preston, School of Communication, Dublin City University, Dublin

Keywords: social dilemma; social media; media theory; political economy of communication; critical theory; technology and society; AI; algorithms; digital media; media policy

The core concerns of this journal, a specific niche within the broad field of media and communication studies, have become ever more mainstream of late. Indeed, whilst concerns about the evolving scope, role, influence, operations, control and regulation of the media of public communication have always been central features of modern capitalism, they have come to occupy a prominent spot in public attention and debate.

This has little to do with spectacular, media-friendly, enterprising boosterism or knowledge-based entrepreneurship, or related efforts in celebrity promotion on the part of key researchers and authors from the political economy of communication. Indeed, one notable quality (virtue) of the latter is that they are a fairly modest, even self-effacing lot on the whole, rarely imitating the kinds of fame-seeking cultural practices which are so prevalent in specific communications industries which form their objects of study. Rather, this shift has largely to do with the trope of ‘events, dear boy, events’ which involve the wider polity, economy and societal settings.

The relevant ‘events’ in this case relate to both political and economic facts on the ground. On the economic front, digital media and technology firms are responsible for the most significant ‘leading edge’ and economic activities today. They occupy many of the top spots in the main listings of the world’s largest corporations. The remarkable rise of the media, communication and platform industries to the pinnacle of contemporary informational capitalism is telegraphed by the single fact that one hybrid tech-media firm, Apple, became the first private corporation to reach a market valuation of US\$2 trillion. Another indicator is that a single social media behemoth can now claim to have some “2.6 billion monthly active users” (Mohsin, 2021). This ‘event’ signals a level of concentrated corporate reach, scale and centralized economic power way beyond the concerns, fears or imaginative grasp of prior critics of monopolistic power. Here, I refer to Adam Smith in the 1780s through to Commons, Schumpeter and Galbraith in the early and middle decades of the 20th century. That media-tech corporations have grown rapidly in recent decades to occupy distinctly prominent and powerful positions at the top-end of the global power nexus amounts to a historical fact (‘event’) of major significance. Such corporations reside at the pinnacle of concentrated capitalist organisation, a fact or ‘event’ with major implications for any theoretical engagement with the political-economic specificities of our times.

In terms of the political sphere, the relevant ‘events’ in this case include all the most prominent electoral moments in recent years across the Western liberal order (or, at least its key Anglophone countries). These include: the election of manifestly right-wing nationalist ideologues, the mobilisation of racist dog-whistles by top political leaders, the so-called ‘Brexit’ referendum of

2016 and, most recently, violent attempts to take over the Capitol building in Washington DC. The latter ‘event’ was provoked by the sitting President in an attempt to reverse the outcome of the Presidential election of November 2020.

In this regard, a significant portion of the citizenry, as well as a majority of Republican senators, have so lost trust in the official political institutions and mainstream media that they, too now believe or proclaim that the 2020 Presidential Election was ‘stolen’ from the incumbent (Tett, 2021).

If the dramatic and violent attempts to take over the Capitol building in Washington DC in January 2021 amount to a historically significant or crucial ‘event’, much of the subsequent attempts at analysis, explanation, and public debate have focused heavily on the role and influence of the contemporary media system, social media in particular. Fingers were quickly and consistently pointed at social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. These were said to have “served as President Donald Trump’s digital megaphones” and were widely blamed for “polarising political opinion, normalising extremism and mobilising violent protest” (Thornhill, 2021).

Although the power and reach of mediated communication certainly has to bear some of the burden of any coherent explanation of the political, economic, ecological or even ‘epistemological’ crises of our time, such analysis must be comprehensive and historically grounded. That means looking beyond the fashionable techno-fetish surrounding digital media, and it means taking seriously the continued role and influence of ‘old media’ as oligopolistic forms of economic power and as shapers of storytelling, including news narratives. These considerations are crucial when it comes to an evidence-based assessment of how diverse media contributed to key recent events such as the storming of the Capitol building in Washington (Thornhill, 2021).

The Social Dilemma: About the film

The Social Dilemma was released just a few months before the dramatic events at the Capitol building, but it clearly points to a set of concerns about social media that had been bubbling under the surface over recent years. These have included the polarisation of political values, increased social isolation and mental illness, and manifestations of right-wing, populist nationalism. The film was first shown at film festivals in the early weeks of 2020 (when such screenings were possible). It was updated later to take account of the Covid pandemic and released on the Netflix platform in September 2020.

The Social Dilemma is directed by Jeff Orlowski, whose previous work includes two critical documentaries dealing with climate change. Indeed, he has equated problems and threats in the digital media domain with those associated with anthropogenic climate-change. In both cases, the civilizational consequences are seen to be profound.

The film has been designed for a general audience and deals in depth with highly topical, complex issues related to the operational features and shaping influences of social media, especially in the United States. It also examines the potential for certain forms of (re-)regulation of the digital or social media landscape. Parts of the film are heavily informed by social psychology and neurolinguistic perspectives on media rather than a critical media studies or political-economy perspective. Yet the film engages with a selection of pressing themes and concerns related to social media. These are addressed by academics from a variety of fields, senior digital-media industry specialists and former social media insiders. In sum, this is a well-resourced docu-drama aimed at a general film audience which is also likely to be relevant to the readers of this journal.

As we will see, *The Social Dilemma* focuses on certain issues and perspectives concerning the specificity of new communication technologies and their impacts on socio-economic, political and cultural change. Such material clearly overlaps with long-held themes in the study of media effects, media regulation, and the evolving political economy of media institutions as enablers of public communication.

The Social Dilemma reviews

On first viewing, one of the distinctive strengths of *The Social Dilemma* is its mobilisation of technologists, industry insiders, and specialist academics to explain the dark side of social media's models and operations. The relevant bodies of expertise range from neuropsychology, psychology, and psychiatry to anthropology, public policy, law, and management studies. Human rights advocates dealing with data issues are also interviewed.

Here, we have been able to mobilise a rather different panel of relevant experts to provide complementary critical reviews of *The Social Dilemma*. They are authored by Robin Mansell, Graham Murdock, Eugenia Siapera and Yuqi Na, all of whom responded to a call for reviews issued by the section editor.

Summary overview

Robin Mansell's review acknowledges that *The Social Dilemma* advances clear, critical messages about how platform companies generate profit through corporate growth and global expansion without regard for public values. It also signals that digital platforms should not be permitted to self-regulate. Mansell's review then proceeds to criticise the film on several fronts. These include its tendency towards techno and media centrism, the frequent unverified claims that machines "know us", that social media has "its own goals and pursues them" and that it is inevitable that technology takes on a "life of its own". Drawing on her interdisciplinary expertise in technology, innovation and communication studies, Mansell criticises the film's simplistic depiction of how media platforms mobilise artificial intelligence to drive their "datafication business model". Additionally, the film's frequent focus on individual level and techno/media centric concerns means that "the film positions the contemporary problem principally as a matter of unethical technology design choices". As regards solutions, the review concludes that instead of emphasising the powerlessness of individuals, "the film might have pointed to the conditions in society that can help to resource individual agency and resistance", both individual and collective.

Graham Murdock's review of *The Social Dilemma* welcomes certain aspects of this popular film's efforts to criticise the operations and orientations of social media, i.e., how social media are deliberately designed to be addictive. Cited here is the wry observation in one scene that the only other major industry which describes its customers as 'users' is the illegal drug trade. But his review is largely centred around strident criticisms of the film's silences and absences. For example, Murdock notes the narrow focus on the voices and biases of high-level technological experts and businesspersons. The privileged role assigned to current or former technological and business insiders in the film's narrative is compounded by this elite's unreflexive tendency to cast themselves as uniquely equipped to effect requisite changes by virtue of their own expertise. His review flags the silences attendant on this narrow range of voices and interests presented in the film. There is an absence of labour and trade union organisations, public cultural institutions, or figures from the environmental movement. Murdock goes on to reframe the rise of digital media as the

latest chapter in “the centuries long march of corporate enclosure and the cumulative commodification of material resources, life chances, and cultural horizons”. For him, sustainable solutions lie “not with more humane overlords” but with the abolition of digital serfdom and the restoration of the commons.

The review by Eugenia Siapera starts by positioning *The Social Dilemma* within the history of moral and social panics linked to (successive) new media. She argues that, as in previous eras, “such discussions reflect broader fears, anxieties and social concerns”. Siapera welcomes the film as “an engaging and welcome attempt to articulate and popularise the main problems and criticisms against social media”. It is said to offer “fascinating insights” on the origins and evolution of social media via the mindset of those involved in their design and marketing, while making a compelling case as to “why we must be concerned about social media”. Yet the majority of the review proceeds to advance a powerful and distinctive set of criticisms about the film’s narrative, design, and overall storytelling. The review identifies three problems concerning *The Social Dilemma*: (i) it overstates the capacities of platforms associated with social media; (ii) it misdiagnoses the problem; (iii) it does not offer credible solutions that may work in the long term. The film’s narrative on occasion recognises that we should not allow the tech companies to define the problem, yet it ends up doing precisely this, by its predominant, focus on big tech insiders. The review concludes that, when it comes to solutions, “thinking outside the box” is for the most part absent from this film.

Yuqi Na’s review starts by welcoming how the narrative of the critical orientation of *The Social Dilemma* diverges from the “individualist heroic narrative lavishing praise on successful social media billionaires”, a typical trope of other popular productions about the media sector (e.g., *The Social Network*, 2010). As regards questions like what is the core mission of social media companies or “what they are being paid for?”, the voices informing this particular film often provide fairly direct answers: “if you are not paying for the product, then you are the product” (to quote Tristan Harris in this film). Clearly this, as the review notes, has echoes of Dallas Smythe’s pioneering work and that of others in the political economy tradition of media studies. Since advertisers pay the companies in exchange for showing their ads to users or viewers, “we are the products, our attention is the product being sold to advertisers”. This is especially true of social media as it tries to sell “certainty” or “the guarantee that if it places an ad, it would be successful”, as Shoshana Zuboff points out in the film. This review offers a serious and substantive critique of a few key myths which are features of the film. They include: “the myth that algorithms are objective” and also “the myth that ‘There Is No Alternative’ to the prevalence of social media technologies. The final section of the review seeks to move beyond the “no alternative” view implied by *The Social Dilemma* and other similar productions in order to engage in a sustained discussion of how “there are indeed significant alternatives to the current profit-driven capitalist mode of social media”.

Beyond media-centric framing of pressing ‘social dilemmas’

These reviews clearly indicate that there are many valid and powerful criticisms of the contemporary media landscape offered by *The Social Dilemma*—especially as it is a film explicitly designed for a general rather than a specialist academic audience.

But these reviews also alert us to significant limits and blind spots. Like so many other productions from the mainstream media industry that seek to engage with current political, economic and social developments, *The Social Dilemma* ultimately falls short of much-needed

systemic or macro-level critique. Within the overall mediascape today, the film largely ignores the continuing role of older media forms and institutions. There is an explicit focus on digital, social media only. More importantly, an almost exclusive focus on the operations of digital media and its presumed power and direct effects (through clever maths, algorithms, neurology, psychology, and other specialist knowledge/expertise forces) undermines understanding. The film's specific form of techno-media-centrism side-lines the macro political-economic and cultural forces at work, and does not acknowledge the power plays, pressures, hurts and coercive experiences associated with neoliberalism. There is no mention of the latter's key achievements—the onward march of economic inequality, precarity, the growing influence rentier capital, homelessness and debt mountains.

From my own viewing as well as the critiques advanced in the four reviews which follow, my key conclusions are, firstly, that the film clearly identifies and describes certain aspects of the operations, design features and orientations of social media. Secondly, however, the causes and remedies for the political, social and media issues identified in the film can only be understood from a wider macro perspective. Specific problems with the contemporary media system are deeply linked to economic, political, and cultural trends at a global level. This means that specific crises of the media system (old and new) must be analysed against the wider crises of economic inequality and precarity, global warming and other pressing aspects of impending ecological disaster. One must also consider vulnerability to global pandemics, political polarisation, the rise of right-wing nationalism, racism and authoritarian cultures, the growing role of billionaire political activism and its 'dark money', and the crash in popular trust in the institutions of liberal democracy. These pressing macro level trends are all best understood as "cascading crises" (Biden, 2021) across the political, economic and ecological system. It is in this context that the media system should be critically analysed.

These macro-level, interlinked or 'cascading crises' demand a radical paradigm shift away from the prevailing political economic order. They also demand a radical restructuring and re-regulation of the media order, given its growing scale and reach in economic, political, social and cultural affairs. Indeed, given the specific operations and flaws of the digital media platforms described in *The Social Dilemma* and the media system insights contained in the four reviews that follow, our final conclusion is clear. Radical reforms of the public communication system involving both old and new media is essential to any viable 'Red-Green New Deal' regime at a global level. Scholar-citizens informed by the critical political-economics of media and communication have special capacities and responsibilities in the advancement of an effective 'Red-Green New Deal' for current times.

Author bio

Paschal Preston is Professor Emeritus, School of Communication, Dublin City University, Dublin. His recent research has been focused on the major crises and pressure points in contemporary capitalism; the evolving forms, role and influences of mediated communication; the hidden economic faces of power and its influence of news media discourse and journalism studies. His recent book publications include: Grisold A and Preston P (eds) (2020) *Economic Inequality and News Media: Discourse, Power and Redistribution*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press; Preston P and Kinnebrock S (eds) (2019) *European Communication History Handbook*. Wiley Blackwell

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Review I

The Social Dilemma: A Contradictory Narrative About Platform Power

Robin Mansell, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science

Keywords: social media; media theory; political economy of communication; technology and society; digital media; media policy; innovation studies

“Awareness is the first step to freedom” (Lanier, 2018: 10). As a docudrama aimed at raising awareness about the ways that online interaction is conditioning the lives and actions of citizens on a global scale, *The Social Dilemma* (directed by Jeff Orlowski in collaboration with the Center for Humane Technology, a US-based non-profit co-founded by former senior employees of leading digital technology developers and online platforms) surely succeeds. Viewed by some 100 million people in 190 countries, mainstream media describes the film as a much-needed wake-up call for citizens, policy makers and technology designers. The principal focus of the film is on how the attention economy’s “optimization for engagement” model is implicated in existential crises facing society.

One message is that digital platforms should not be permitted to self-regulate. Consistent with research in the political economy of communication and other critical scholarly traditions (Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Mansell and Steinmueller, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019), the principal motivation of the platform companies is shown to be achieving profits through corporate growth and global expansion without regard for public values. The film links the platforms’ artificial intelligence-supported datafication business model to the rising incidence of mental health problems, the loss of individuals’ capacity to make reasoned choices and the increasing fragility of democracy.

The film’s narrative effectively weaves together the voices of former senior employees and investors in the commercial digital platforms. They draw upon their insider knowledge as designers and strategists to expose the commercial drivers of advertising-based digital platform business model. An impressive array of academics specialising in neuropsychology, cultural anthropology, psychiatry and social psychology, law and platform management as well as policy analysts and human rights advocates for the use of data for public good is gathered to demonstrate the harms of this model for individuals and society. The message is that “people have no idea what is true”, and that this matters. Their insights are connected through fictional scenes telling the story of a family’s struggle around social media use that is likely to resonate with relatively affluent and digitally well-connected viewers. Another storyline emphasises the individualisation of privacy intrusive surveillance by depicting the work of three male platform employees who manipulate a boy’s online engagement consistent with driving up advertising revenues by using behaviour modification

techniques. This vignette suggests that technology platform employees work enthusiastically in the service of their employers, only very occasionally questioning the ethics of their practice.

Contradictory messaging

As regards technology innovation, the film declares that technology can be a “force for good” but warns that “nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse” (quoting Sophocles). Technology is always associated with unintended utopian and dystopian consequences while innovations in technology are “indistinguishable from magic” (quoting Arthur C. Clarke). This magic involves artificial intelligence machines that put “spells on people”. The film teaches us that machines “know us”, that social media has “its own goals and pursues them” and that it is inevitable that technology takes on a “life of its own”. This particular ‘technology-out-of-control’ narrative is attributed to the aforementioned magic and coupled with an insistence that this technology has given us a global culture of manipulation that puts “deceit at the centre of everything we do”. Because, few people understand artificial intelligence, we have “almost lost control over systems which control us more than we control them”. The film argues that predictive algorithms will inevitably become more integrated within our lives, shaping how we act using advancing behaviour modification techniques. In these segments of the film, there are only “uncaring algorithms”. The “unseen manipulators” (Lanier, 2018: 23) in the form of humans and institutions (markets, companies, states) and their asymmetrical power relations are ignored in these segments of the film. Here, the film emphasises that innovations in artificial intelligence and machine learning amount to a new “species of power” to which humans must adapt. At these points in the narrative, the film seems close to a neoliberal or neoclassical economics portrayal of how the inevitable shocks of disruptive technology affect the socio-economic system. This does not represent a critical framing of technological innovation processes.

When the “unseen manipulators” are revealed in the film, they are introduced mainly as “we”, referring to the individual technology designers (largely 20 to 35 years old, white and male) who need to be held to account. They have fallen under the magical spell of technology. Fictionalised film scenes portray this ‘we’ as male tech employees charged with manipulating user behaviour by directly intervening with an individual social media user. Apart from the fact that it is unrealistic to portray each individual online platform user as being monitored in real time by a human being, this aspect of the film’s storytelling contradicts assertions elsewhere in the film that no-one knows what is happening and that it is the technology system that is out of control. Insofar as there is agency, it rests with the designers—not so much with the platform owners and their investors or, indeed, with a market system enabled by a neoliberal logic.

The framing of the ‘social dilemma’ is bluntly totalising insofar as it rules out any notion of agency on the part of individual social media users. For example, the narrative tells us that the exponential advance of technology innovation is such that artificial intelligence “already runs today’s world”. Positive intermittent reinforcement, aka Skinnerian behavioural modification, augmented by deep insight into neuropsychology and cognition, has enabled the implantation of unconscious desires and wants, succeeding in “social pacification” by intervening in the human brain stem to affect our identities and sense of self-worth. The film advances a strong claim that this is directly causally related to rising rates of depression, self-harm and suicides among young people despite the fact that empirical evidence is equivocal on this causality. This claim is reinforced by the narrative that “these services are killing people and causing people to kill themselves”. In the

film, Lanier asserts that we have built a super brain which leaves no room for self-determination. Insofar as there is no scope for agency, for variation, for multiple factors contributing to susceptibility to the algorithm's "desires", the message is dystopian and disempowering for individuals as well as organised political activists.

On the matter of individual agency, however, the film embodies a contradiction. We are forcefully informed that the agency of social media users (including the tech designers) is destroyed by technology. Yet the film's message is that individuals as consumers and citizens or as designers must *insist* on a renewal of an ethics of technology. With responsibility located with the individual, people, young and old, are advised to uninstall their apps, turn off notifications, refuse cookies, resist recommendations, pause to evaluate sources of information and to decline to click on click bait. Parents are advised to limit their children's online activity. Yet, the film's family vignette scenes tend to underline that individual willpower cannot curtail social media usage—even the brute force of locking away a device fails. Similarly, platform company executives in the film, personified by Mark Zuckerberg, are depicted as the individual "unseen manipulators" who are sufficiently powerful to resist charges that their social media services are implicated in psychological, social, political and economic harm.

Structural power and financial incentives under capitalism—familiar issues in the political economy of communications studies field—are addressed intermittently in this film. These aspects tend to be overshadowed by an overriding—emphasis on the individualisation of impacts and on cognition, affect and behavioural change. A venture capitalist recognises that under surveillance capitalism social media users are sold to advertisers in the attention economy. Business models with the goals of user engagement, growth and profit are shown to result in the sale of predictive certainty to advertisers—"trading in human futures at scale", as Zuboff says, and this is said to be overwhelming humans.

Mobilising for change

The Social Dilemma advances a strong and clear message that resistance is required to avert the consequences of the exploitative use of digital technologies, i.e., the amplification of misinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech, and increasing political polarisation. The existential threat is that, in the absence of effective resistance, society will fail to meet the challenges of climate change, pandemics, the collapse of democracy and the demise of the global economy—ultimately resulting in the collapse of civilization. This is the likely outcome if the platforms' practices persist. As Cathy O'Neil says, if "we can't agree what is true, we cannot navigate out of any of our problems" (see also O'Neil, 2016). Resistance or reform strategies are discussed, albeit relatively briefly, without resolving the contradictions around the treatment of agency. For example, we are told that:

- Massive public pressure is required to change the business model (but this can be mobilised using the very same social media that has been shown in the film to have denuded citizens of their agency).
- Enlightened technology innovation leaders and designers who realise their moral responsibility must practice ethical technology design for good (the narrative shows that this is unlikely from within the dominant platform companies).

- Wikipedia is mentioned as an alternative business model that does not seek to monetise data and which encourages “objective” facts or “truths” (no other models are mentioned, and it is also observed that there is no harm in the search for profits as long as this occurs in a competitive market and there is no mention of public or collective ownership or subscription models).
- The digital platforms should be subject to regulation to ensure that technology is used for good to uphold fundamental human rights (yet investment in advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning with opaque and unintended harmful consequences are depicted as inevitable and the benefits are welcomed).
- Institutional legal reform is needed to protect social media users’ privacy and taxes based on data asset holdings to disincentivise the collection of massive amounts of data are suggested.
- Some technology designs and practices should be outlawed completely.

Given the film’s emphasis on individual responsibility, there is no discussion of digital or data literacies or about who should provide the resources to enable people to resist harms inflicted by the use of technology operating in the service of capitalist growth and expansion. There is no mention of alternative trainings for technology designers that might heighten their awareness and encourage ethical design. There is no mention of designers’ working conditions or of the corporate owners’ disciplinary power to silence criticism by employees. Oddly, given the American context, there is no mention of how freedom of expression might be affected by regulatory measures. It is recognised that social media tools are being appropriated by authoritarian state actors—but there is no mention of state use of these tools for surveillance by authorities within the western democracies.

The market institutions (rules and norms) that have enabled the digital platforms’ growth are hardly touched upon. The corporate appropriation of tracing and personal data based on the prevailing legal institutionalisation of property rights is not discussed. The global race for leadership in next generation artificial intelligence is welcomed (if it is used for “good”). Although the digital platforms should not be arbitrators of “truth”, the question of who should deliberate and act to discern the “truth” is not discussed. When the film departs from the metaphorical magical properties of technology, its messaging about institutional or collective pathways to change is remarkably weak.

Conclusion

The message of *The Social Dilemma* is that technology is designed to “bring out the worst in society”. “We”—technology designers—can make different choices to design “tech for good”. The messaging in the film drifts away from an insistence on the inherently exploitative character of capitalism, giving the impression that, once upon a time, there were considerable efforts to protect young people from media-related harms. In a pre-digital era, it is suggested that there was a consensus around meaning and moral behaviour in the western democracies. In the film, there is no recognition of the persistence over time of power asymmetries that negate the abilities of individuals to thrive and enhance their wellbeing. It is acknowledged that advertising-based business models aimed at changing consumer behaviour and the use of propaganda to influence

voting patterns have been developing for decades (see McGuigan, 2019; Turow, 2011). However, the film positions the contemporary problem principally as a matter of unethical technology design choices.

Instead of emphasising the powerlessness of individuals (consumers, citizens, technology designers), the film might have pointed to the conditions in society that can help to resource individual agency and resistance—both individual and collective. It might have highlighted variability in the cultural, social, political and economic contexts in which people encounter digital technologies. It might have highlighted consistently that it is the commercial values of platform operators, together with the interpenetration of multiple forms of inequity and injustice, partly, though not always directly, exacerbated by digital platform strategies, that are the problem.

The contradictions inherent in an exploitative capitalist system of surveillance might have been taken as the principal theme of the film. One could then emphasise why it is possible to call for action based on an individually agentic theory of change rooted in moral and ethical principles, alongside a robust critique of capitalism. This contradiction is not acknowledged. The main message instead is of individual powerlessness in the face of magical behind-the-screen technologies. Hope rests in a future when technology designers are sensitised to the harms of technology and save the rest of us from dystopia.

The film may motivate some viewers to act differently. It does signpost insights about power relations in line with a political economy of the media and communications and it succeeds in drawing attention to the potentially addictive aims of behavioural modification, in theory and practice. The film calls for broad discussion—a more robust, dialogic public sphere for deliberation—which is much needed and for which this author has advocated (Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020). But it does not do so with any hint of the paradoxes of institutionalised power relations—their enabling and simultaneously disabling character. By ignoring this, the film seems likely to confuse viewers about whether or not there are realistic pathways to change, whether via structural reform through policy and regulation or through civil society mobilisation and individual resistance.

Academics who study the causes and consequences of exploitative platform power might be expected to welcome a film intended to broaden support for actions that could curtail platform power and mitigate its harms. Indeed, my own research has certain overlaps with the film's critique of the advertising-driven platform business model despite differences when it comes to specific proposals for change. For this academic, however, the film is very frustrating. It works polemically—it needs to if it is to entertain. Ultimately, however, as indicated, I find the film riddled with apparently unnoticed contradictions. It makes strong claims implying direct causation between online engagement and societal problems and it also conveys an impression of uniform impacts without regard to variations in individuals' agency or their differential recourse to resources in the navigation of online spaces.

Despite acknowledging that the dynamics of surveillance capitalism are a central part of the problem by incorporating Zuboff's voice (see Zuboff, 2019), the solutions on offer are located principally with individuals and their responsibility to behave morally and ethically to avert harms (see Haidt and Allen, 2020). This solution is offered despite the film's emphasis on the inescapability of addiction to the next dopamine neurotransmitter hit. This is evidenced by Lembke, a Stanford medical expert specialising in opioid addiction (see DeBattista et al., 2002; Haug et al., 2020). There are a few mentions of the need for digital market structure and regulatory reform but these are remarkably underdeveloped. The viewer is left none the wiser about what alternative

business models might be feasible. Ethical technical design and mass resistance by individuals, supported by human rights legal experts and advocates such as Lanier, are the proposed avenues for change (see Lanier and Weyl, 2018). But the main message is of dystopian individual disempowerment that might be rescued by enlightened technology designers finding their way to the “tech for good” design ethos of a not-so-distant past.

The film’s director inevitably had choices to make, but the result is “a selective presentation of evidence and an exaggerated sense of their [the platforms’] clout” (Winseck, 2020: 243). There is no clear message about what resources are needed to create a pathway to change or, for example, as Pasquale (2020: 15) puts it, how “we can channel technology through law”. In this film, it is unclear what actions beyond a dialogue are needed to build cadres of self-aware citizens and technology designers capable of resisting the power of the technology companies. If, as the film insists, everyone has lost their capacity for resistance, how is change to come about? On this matter, the script is silent and does not enlighten.

Author bio

Robin Mansell is a Professor at the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Her recent publications include: Mansell R and Steinmueller WE (2020) *Advanced Introduction to Platform Economics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing; and Cammaerts B and Mansell R (2020). Digital platform policy and regulation: toward a radical democratic turn'. *International Journal of Communication*, 14: 1-19.

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- [1] Except where a citation appears, quotes are from the film.

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Review II

Missing in Action: Silences and Evasions in *The Social Dilemma*

Graham Murdock, Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Loughborough University, UK

Keywords: social dilemma; social media; media theory; political economy of communication; technology and society; digital media; media policy; commons; public sphere

The first indication that Silicon Valley insiders were having second thoughts about the ways the technologies they had created were being deployed came in 2010 with the publication of Jaron Larnier's *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*. Widely acknowledged as the primary architect of virtual reality systems, his reservations could not be dismissed as ill-informed Left Luddism. He built on this initial intervention in a series of subsequent publications and appears in *The Social Dilemma* rehearsing the critique of dominant social media platforms developed in his 2018 book, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*.

He is joined on screen by a phalanx of digital gamekeepers turned poachers all of whom have held senior positions in major social media corporations, including Facebook, Google and Twitter. Their criticisms are intercut with scenes from a fictional portrait of one young man's immersion in social media designed to dramatize the main points being made. In a vivid imagining of asymmetric and unaccountable platform power he appears as both a physical person going about his everyday life and as a virtual image made up of the innumerable data points generated by his online activities, monitored and manipulated by three controllers, all young white males, in a futuristic command and control centre. Other scenes pick up on contributors' arguments that social media are deliberately designed to be addictive by showing him suffering severe withdrawal symptoms after trying to give up his smart phone and ecstatic relief when he activates it again. As one contributor wryly notes, the only other major industry that describes its customers as 'users' is the illegal drug trade. In a climatic final scene, we witness our anti-hero inadvertently caught up in a violent street demonstration pointing up contributors' arguments around the radical polarisation of online political speech and the digital destruction of a public sphere based on respectful deliberation and agreement on what counts as valid empirical evidence.

At first sight *The Social Dilemma* appears to offer a comprehensive and authoritative overview of the critical issues raised by the exponential growth of social media. It points to clear instances of corporate excess and irresponsibility requiring urgent redress. A closer look however reveals fundamental silences and evasions in the way the problem is framed.

The first person to appear on screen is Tristan Harris, former Design Ethicist at Google and co-founder of the Centre for Humane Technology. Directly after short sequences introducing the other main contributors, we see him announcing his plans for the Centre to a small audience. He

reappears at intervals throughout *The Social Dilemma*, addressing large audiences, testifying at congressional hearings, and speaking directly to viewers from a chair in a bare room. His Centre's critique of prevailing conditions and its declared mission of working towards "a world built on *humane technology* that speaks for the common good" (italics in the original) provides the animating rationale for the production (Centre for Humane Technology 2021).

The contributors to *The Social Dilemma* cast themselves as uniquely equipped to intervene by virtue of their technological and industry expertise. As one participant remarks: "We built these things, and we have a responsibility to change them". The privileged role assigned to business insiders is confirmed by the roster of 'Allies and Advisors' on the Centre for Humane Technology's website. Alongside ivy league researchers specialising in digital media, the list includes Sandy Parakilas (formerly Facebook's operations manager for privacy), now Senior Product Marketing Manager, Privacy at Apple. The list also includes 'celebrities' such as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, signatories to lucrative production deals with both Netflix and Spotify. These continuing beneficiaries of digital business as usual are unlikely pioneers of radical change. There is no one on the list from labour and trade union organisations, no leading advocates for public cultural institutions, and no prominent figures from the environmental movement. These crucial constituencies of interest are also missing from *The Social Dilemma*. Their invisibility demonstrates the production's damaging social closure and refusal to confront the full range of issues raised by the current organisation of digital media.

The contributors are drawn from the technological and executive elite, whose position in the companies they helped create was secure, valued and very well rewarded (conferring multiple career choices). Nowhere is it noted that their privileges rested on the supporting labour of insecure, badly paid workers performing repetitive, alienating, and sometimes physically and psychologically damaging tasks. Such jobs are typified by the human evaluators vetting violent and abusive content and the labourers in Amazon's warehouses. Nor is it mentioned that the major digital companies are notoriously hostile to unionisation and collective bargaining for improvements to pay and conditions. *The Social Dilemma* underlines the harms digital platforms may inflict on their users but fails to mention or even recognise the harms inflicted on their workers.

This silence extends to the exploitation entailed at every link in the chain of digital production, from the child labourers scavenging in unsafe open cast mines for the cobalt essential for constructing smart phones to the young women corralled in the barracks serving offshore assembly plants, the unlicensed mariners on the giant container ships transporting digital devices under flags of convenience, and the gig economy van drivers delivering them to your door. All these essential workers are missing in action in *The Social Dilemma*, invisible and voiceless.

Detailing their labour compels us to confront the materiality of digital media and acknowledge that the devices we enjoy are depleting scarce resources, consuming energy and manufacturing pollution and waste. Their current modes of production, use and disposal are generating escalating ecological despoliation and expanding carbon footprints. Again, these environmental costs are written out of *The Social Dilemma*'s narrative of harms.

Contributors accept that the digital majors' business model is the principal agent of harm and continually return to the techniques for maximising user attention and engagement that generate the troves of personal data sold on to advertisers. Their solution is to dilute the power of the digital majors and make the technology less exploitative. The Centre for Humane Technology's website lists the legislative interventions currently on the table. They range from anti-trust measures to

dismantle digital monopolies and abolish anti-competitive practices to proposals for tighter editorial controls over what is posted on social platforms. These curbs are long overdue.

The tipping point came early in January 2021 when a violent mob waving Nazi and Confederate flags, some carrying arms, stormed the legislative chambers in the Capitol building at the heart of American democracy. They were intent on preventing the ratification of Joe Biden's victory in the Presidential Election. The ensuing clashes, which left five people dead, forced the leading media platforms to concede that Donald Trump's inflammatory social media posts, urging his supporters to march on Washington because of a supposedly fraudulent election result, had played a pivotal role in an unprecedented subversion of the democratic process. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube suspended his accounts, but advocates of statutory regulation could point to the abject failure of their prior self-policing systems. They had welcomed the business generated by Donald Trump's posts of blatant lies, abuse of opponents, endorsements of white supremacism and recycled conspiracy theories throughout his presidency.

Whatever legal restrictions are eventually placed on the operations of the digital majors, it is clear that none of the contributors to *The Social Dilemma* questions advertising's continuing role as the primary source of funding. There is no mention of the ecological and social harms inflicted by the product promotion that saturates digital screens. No recognition that continually celebrating a consumerist definition of personal freedom and building social solidarities around market segments works powerfully against ideals of inclusive citizenship and the recognition of shared fate. And there is no acknowledgment that the accelerated cycles of obsolescence written into the continual upgrading and replacement of digital devices insistently supports a general culture of hyper-consumption and disposal that is inflicting much irreparable damage to earth systems.

The rise of digital media is the latest chapter in the centuries-long march of corporate enclosure and the cumulative commodification of material resources, life chances, and cultural horizons. The solution lies not with more humane overlords but with the abolition of digital serfdom and the restoration of the commons. The idea of building a public service internet as a space of encounter, dialogue and collaboration between cultural and informational professionals, amateur enthusiasts, and the population at large may be locked out of the gated communities of Silicon Valley, but it is currently under active consideration across Europe (see Murdock 2018; BBC, 2021; EPOS 2021; Net Commons (2021); Public Space 2021) Finding ways to construct a publicly funded digital commons, accessible and open to all, entirely independent of product promotion, and based on socially just and ecologically sustainable infrastructures and devices is our best hope of ensuring that the social potential of digital connectivity is placed at the service of the common good. This alternative is entirely absent from *The Social Dilemma* which remains firmly wedded to market-based structures and a vision of digital capitalism with a humane face, which if left unopposed, will perpetuate social and ecological harms on a mass scale.

Author bio

Graham Murdock is Emeritus Professor of Culture and Economy, Loughborough University. His research and publications focus on the changing organisation, role and impact of contemporary communication systems. It ranges from studies of institutional structures to research on cultural forms and everyday practices, but he is best known for his work in the critical political economy of culture and communications, the changing forms and exercise of power and the dynamics of

change. His recent publications include: Murdock G (2020) Profits of deceit: performing populism in polarised times. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23(6): 874-899.

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Review III

Escaping the Matrix or Repeating Liberal (Techno)Solutions?

Eugenia Siapera, Information and Communication Studies, University College Dublin

Keywords: social dilemma; social media; media theory; political economy of communication; critical theory; AI and algorithms; digital media; media policy

There never has been a medium of communication that has not generated a backlash or even a moral panic about its possible effects. Socrates was notoriously critical of writing as a medium of communication; the popularity of romantic novels in the 18th century led to fears of reading ‘addiction’ and loss of morals, similar to films in the 20th century. Radio was feared for its possible manipulative effects, as in the infamous Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* on CBS radio in 1938. More recently, television was linked to social apathy and video games to violence.

Seeing social media at the centre of social fears about their power and effects is a continuation of this long line of media criticism and it does not come as a surprise. This is not to say that there is no basis for criticism, but rather to provide historical context. Given the centrality of the media in society, we must certainly talk about them. As with the principal media of previous eras, such discussions reflect broader fears, anxieties and social concerns.

The Social Dilemma is no exception to this. It represents an engaging and welcome attempt to articulate and popularise the main criticisms against social media. It involves critiques from some of the developers of social media themselves, who offer fascinating insights into the historical beginnings of social media and the mindset of those who made them. They all make a compelling case as to why we must be concerned about social media. However, as a serious critique of social media, the documentary faces three main problems: (i) it overstates the capacities of platforms; (ii) it misdiagnoses the problem; and (iii) it does not offer credible solutions that may work in the long term.

Jeff Orlowski is a master of documentaries, and *The Social Dilemma* is a great example of this mastery. It does not have a single narrator, but several participants, who taken together make for an impressive collection of experts. Tech engineers, high-ranking Silicon Valley executives and investors as well as well-known academics are all consulted and offer their informed views. Because talking heads do not make for an engaged audience the documentary also includes television footage and dramatized versions of the effects of social media on the lives of a fictional US family. The hybrid format is very effective because the dramatized segments vividly illustrate some key issues and problems concerning social media.

“So then, is there a problem? What is the problem?” is the starting question posed to the experts. None of them have a quick answer, but they are all “very concerned”. So much so that some of them left their (presumably lucrative) positions in various corporations (Google/YouTube,

Facebook, Twitter etc.) because of these concerns. To get an answer to this question, experts offer context. It was not all bad, we are told, in the beginning “it was a force for good”, says Twitter’s former senior vice president for engineering; “meaningful systemic changes were happening because of these platforms across the world” says the former president of Pinterest. These comments are an early indication of the kind of exaggeration and overstatement that runs throughout the documentary. Now, we are experiencing the flip side of social media: serious social consequences. There is mounting evidence of psychological problems, including low self-esteem and addictive behaviours; social problems, such as social isolation; and political problems, such as fake news, hacking by foreign powers, and polarisation. All these are attributed to social media. Using television footage of riots in the US, featuring white supremacists and general social unrest, the documentary cuts to Chamath Palihapitiya, a former Facebook executive, according to whom “the tools that are created today are eroding the social fabric of how society works”. And this is how the problem is couched in *The Social Dilemma*: social malaise, tensions, and violent extremism alongside mental health crises are all down to social media. This is a mega claim that is not really supported either in the documentary or by actual empirical research. It is the kind of argument you would offer to explain technological determinism. It seriously overestimates the role, and misunderstands the position, of social media, which after all did not emerge ex nihilo, but as part of the current socio-economic and political system (which it also reflects).

The second central claim of the documentary is that social media have this effect because they are programmed in ways that can affect us at a neurological level, through an elaborate system of rewards and punishments, which are geared towards keeping us engaged with the platforms. This is part of the very design of platforms, from the reaction buttons to the recommender systems, from push notifications to tags. All this is dramatized through a somewhat awkward set of scenes in what is meant to be an algorithm command centre in which algorithmic decisions and adjustments are made when users appear uninterested or disengaged. Drawn in by these algorithms, the user—the young man of the fictional US family—is compelled to respond to tags, reply to messages, and follow recommendations tailored to some of his preferences all the while drawing him deeper and deeper into rabbit holes of extremism. Tristan Harris, a former Google employee and Stanford graduate with a postgraduate degree in human persuasion, makes a good case for the disproportionate power and influence wielded by social media: “never before in human history”, he says, “did 15 young white guys from California have so much power to affect billions of people”. There are indeed compelling reasons to agree that platforms have disproportionate, and for the most part totally unregulated, power.

The Social Dilemma is at its strongest when it discusses how algorithms are calibrated in ways that draw people in because they rely on behavioural patterns that the users themselves have created. They are therefore very powerful in eliciting responses from us. Algorithms are personalised, and users have personalised feeds serving different information to them. Because of this, they formulate worldviews that may be not only drastically different to those around them but also totally cut off from reality. But this behavioural psychology model of stimulus-response that underpins many of the arguments made by Harris and some of the other speakers is simplistic and reductionist. While indeed social media platforms should be held responsible for enabling false and harmful information to circulate, people may follow conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs for a number of complex socio-psychological reasons and not as the direct result of the algorithmic structure of social media.

Similarly, the documentary presents compelling accounts of increased anxiety, depression and self-harm among young people, an increase that coincides with the rise in the popularity of social media platforms. Social comparisons with filtered and algorithmically enhanced pictures on image-based platforms fuel body dysmorphia among mostly young girls, causing lower self esteem and depression. It is really disheartening to see this increase in young people's mental health problems, but are social media really responsible for a patriarchal and hyper-individualist culture that reduces women's value to their looks and divides society to winners and losers? This is not to exonerate social media but to understand them and their functions in their social context. The effects attributed to social media can be traced to already embedded value systems and ideologies, which social media and their algorithms pick up and amplify.

The Social Dilemma experts all agree that the primary influence upon the structure and design of social media is their business model. Like many media, social media platforms rely on advertisements. Unlike most media, however, social media can generate incredibly detailed portraits of their users based on the data they collect. They can then sell these to advertisers and to anyone else who may find them useful. Shoshanna Zuboff is invited to make her case on Surveillance Capitalism: in essence, she says, the business model of social media is the sale of personal and intimate information on all of us collected through extensive surveillance. This is not only an issue because of the invasion of our privacy. One of the biggest problems discussed by *The Social Dilemma* concerns the implications of handing such detailed data to bad actors. Once more, the narrative here is pushed to overstatement: can bad actors really manipulate people with such ease? It is interesting to see that *The Social Dilemma* chose footage from Europe to illustrate this point, showing the rise of populist parties in Italy and Spain. Any political instability in Europe, however, is much more likely the direct result of years of austerity policies rather than social media manipulation per se. There is "a global assault on democracy", argues Renée Diresta of the Stanford Internet Observatory, "and the countries targeted are those that run democratic elections". It is easy and comforting to think that our problems are attributable to some bad actors out there rather than the systemic elements of our societies. It is equally comforting to think that there is a clear solution that can solve our problems: if the reason for all this malaise is the business model then the problem will go away if we change this. Such comforting assertions do not make them true.

While the documentary features Cathy O' Neill and her crucial point that we should not allow the tech companies to define the problem, *The Social Dilemma* seems to be doing precisely this, by essentially platforming only former big tech employees, interspersed by a few academics. So, when it comes to solutions, 'thinking outside the box' is for the most part absent. "You can destroy the tech and billions of shareholder value but at the end of the day you need to generate revenue", argues one expert. "There is nothing wrong with making money", says another. The problem is how you make money. Experts are unequivocally in favour of regulation. They may lack imagination, but their ideas are both reasonable and for the most part realistic: they all support some kind of financial regulation of the data market. Jaron Lanier believes that any solution would have to realign the financial incentives of platforms so that the companies are disincentivised from hosting false and harmful content. Joe Toscano, a former Google 'Experience Design Consultant', proposes a tax on data collection and processing, which will then "give a fiscal reason for companies not to acquire every piece of data on the planet". Regulation, argues Roger McNamee, an early Facebook investor, should revolve around the interests of users and not those of billionaires. Shoshanna Zuboff takes this a step further, arguing for an outright ban on markets for personal data because "they undermine democracy, and they undermine freedom".

There is no doubt that regulation is sorely needed and long overdue. It is also time to address the monopolies that have been created, to demand that these corporations pay taxes fairly and be held accountable for the wellbeing of their users. But the question remains: can social media regulation address the social malaise that *The Social Dilemma* rightly observes? Is their diagnosis of the social media business model as the primary cause of social malaise accurate?

While the experts are certainly onto something when they identify the ways in which the business model shapes the design and interactions of the platform, this mono-causal explanation does not ring true. Where or how did this business model emerge? What shaped it, so that in turn it shapes us? At a point towards the end, Joe Toscano lists a series of countries—“Germany, Spain, France, Brazil, Australia”—and says that “they are all now imploding on each other”. “And what do they have in common?” he asks. Neoliberal capitalism, I hear you say? Years of austerity? Exacerbated inequalities and exploitation of workers, both local and migrant? No, the answer, according to *The Social Dilemma*, is Facebook and social media. Throughout the hour and a half of the documentary, experts are circling around without once naming explicitly the socio-economic and political system that created and sustains Silicon Valley and these corporations. As tempting as it may be to believe that regulating social media will restore world peace and harmony, we have to admit that this is not much more than a welcome first step. As bad as social media may be, it is likely that the worst is yet to come, if we do not open our eyes to the realities of climate catastrophe, the expropriation of natural resources to the point of destruction, deeply entrenched racism and misogyny, intense exploitation and pauperisation of workers, and a profoundly uneven world system.

As a documentary aired on Netflix, *The Social Dilemma* does a great job in popularising some of the workings of social media. But in doing so it over-sensationalises them and their possible impact on society. It is also at times irritating to be exposed to the naive and a-historical and US-centric worldviews of mostly young white male engineers and tech entrepreneurs, although in some ways it reveals one of the big problems in tech today: who produces it? To give an example, in discussing the problematic dealing in data profiles, an exasperated Tristan Harris exclaims: “State actors can buy information to destabilise countries” and then proceeds to list a series of afflicted African countries. “Why are we allowing this?” he wonders, evidently without a hint of irony or an awareness of the role of the US on the world stage. The choice of experts to feature in the documentary is for the most part a reflection of these worldviews: idealistic opinions about tech and very little awareness of world history and the world outside of the US. Although there are many vocal and respected critics of the tech industry within and outside the US, and many women (black, white, and brown) among them, we never get to hear their voices. And this is, in short, what *The Social Dilemma* is: a well-intentioned but limited critique of social media. It follows the cannon of social media critiques in creating a moral panic about social media and articulating current fears and anxieties. Unlike other media critiques, however, most notably those associated with the Frankfurt School, it fails to incorporate the wider picture, and for this reason, it comes across as naive at its best and glib at its worst.

Author bio

Eugenia Siapera is Professor of Information and Communication Studies and head of the ICS School at University College Dublin. Prior to this, she has held positions at universities in Greece, UK and the Netherlands. Her research interests are in the area of digital and social media, political

communication and journalism. Recent projects include studies of racist hate speech in the digital sphere and the digital memory of conflict. Her recent books include *Understanding New Media* (Sage, 2018, 2nd edn). Recent articles include: Siapera E and Viejo-Otero P (2021) Governing hate: Facebook and digital racism. *Television & New Media* 22(2):112-130; & Siapera E and Papadopoulou L (2021) Hate as a 'hook': the political and affective economy of 'hate journalism'. *Journalism* [First Published January 10, 2021].

Review IV

The Social Dilemma's Dilemma: Challenging and Reproducing Social Media Myths

Yuqi Na, CAMRI, University of Westminster

Keywords: social dilemma, user commodity, myth, algorithm, digital commons

With impressive statements from Silicon Valley insiders, computer scientists, academics, writers, and exquisitely crafted visual narrative content, the 2020 documentary film *The Social Dilemma* has brought some critical voices to the public and challenged some prevailing myths of social media. Critical this may be, but it can hardly be considered as radical. In any case, whether the film has the power to influence change in line with the hopes of its makers is another matter entirely.

The first impressive point about the film is its frank, straight-forward message concerning the relationships between online advertising, social media and users. Instead of creating another individualist heroic narrative lavishing praise on successful social media billionaires (as in *The Social Network*, 2010), *The Social Dilemma* asks a key question—what are the social media companies such as Google and Facebook being paid for? The film provides a direct answer: “*if you are not paying for the product, then you are the product*” (Tristan Harris). Advertisers pay the companies in exchange for showing their ads to us—we are the products, our attention is the product being sold to advertisers as is the “imperceptible change in your own behaviour and perception”, in the words of computer scientist Jaron Lanier. As Shoshana Zuboff, the author of the *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, points out in the film, social media is selling “certainty”, the guarantee that if it places an ad, it would be successful.

This is probably one of the 'woohoo' watching moments for researchers who have been trying to bring this issue to light. As early as 1977, Canadian researcher Dallas Smythe noticed the role played by mass media in facilitating the capitalist mode of production in advanced capitalist societies. He had already pointed out that “audiences and readerships” comprise the commodity form of “mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications under monopoly capitalism” (Smythe, 1977/1994: 3). Indeed, Smythe also claimed that audiences' watching time is also a type of work time during which workers are continuously being exploited by the capitalist system. Many scholars have contested and refined Smythe's theory by asking the following questions: What is exactly is being sold to the advertisers? What is the role of the ratings industry? and How does audience community analysis interrelate with feminist theories of the media (Garnham, 1979; Jhally and Livant, 1986; Meeham, 1984; Murdock, 1978; Smythe, 1981). In this respect, *The Social Dilemma* follows other documentary films that have also explored the relationships between corporations, branding and media, e.g., *No Logo* (2003) and *The Corporation* (2003).

Processes similar to those identified by Smythe and others are now taking place on platforms and spaces on the internet. As *The Social Dilemma* points out, to achieve successful prediction or “certainty”, social media platforms need a lot of data. Commodities sold by the advertising-supported platforms comprise the users, their attention, online time and behaviours, and personal information. The time users spend on social media becomes work time, a time during which they are engaged in producing user-communities and economic value for the platforms. In this way, they become unpaid user-workers conducting free labour (Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2000). This is the secret as to why social media companies' revenue has increased so rapidly. They accumulate capital by exploiting user labour through the selling of user-communities. Digital platforms process and package user data and sell it to advertisers and marketers (Comor, 2015). For example, by developing rating systems and selling keywords to advertisers, Google transforms users' search queries and search results into commodities and transforms users' online activities and searches into unpaid labour (Bilić, 2016; Fuchs, 2014; Lee, 2011; Turow, 2012).

Another cheering moment from *The Social Dilemma* for critical social media or algorithm researchers is its consideration of influential myth that algorithms are objective. The film gives a straight-forward declaration—they are not. As a data scientist, Cathy O'Neil, states in the film “Algorithms are optimised to some definition of success...So, if a commercial enterprise builds an algorithm to their definition of success, it's commercial interests, it's usually profits”.

The Social Dilemma also tries to address the dichotomous narratives regarding algorithms—utopian and dystopian. The former views artificial intelligence (AI) as the solution to all social problems. It will increase productivity to produce individualised consumer products, provide financial services, make judicial judgments and diagnose diseases. *The Social Dilemma* uses footage of Mark Zuckerberg showing how he claims to build more AI tools to deal with existing problems. This claim was immediately followed by an objection from Cathy O'Neil. She points out that “people talk about AI as if it will know the truth, AI is not going to solve these problems, AI cannot solve the problem of fake news. Google does not have the option of saying is this conspiracy, is this truth, because they don't know what truth is. They don't have a proxy for the truth that is better than a click”. This is a precise and strong objection against the techno-fix myth.

As many prior researchers have emphasised, algorithms, or AI in general, are not developed in a vacuum. Against the popular discourse that portrays an algorithm as a neutral and objective, if powerful, technical tool, one can argue that it pursues certain goals depending on context (Gillespie, 2014). Technology is not an independent social force external to social relations or social power struggles (Fisher, 2010; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Mosco, 2005; Pinch and Bijker, 1984; Webster, 2002). Often, its development follows the logic of capital. In the case of social media, major companies capitalise on the information and data they gather and profit from exploiting workers (Bilić, 2016; Briken and Taylor, 2018; Wood et al., 2019). Thus, with more than 200 signals besides Page Rank to determine what search results are relevant to its user (Bilić, 2016), a Google algorithm contains interpretations and value judgements. Algorithms are not the pure neutral and objective artefacts they appear to be.

The other prevailing narrative is to see AI as creating a dystopia that will ultimately run out of control and destroy humanity. To some extent, *The Social Dilemma* has done a better job in challenging the techno-fix or 'algorithms are neutral' myth than the dystopian myth. Attributing social media related problems to "the worst in society", who are enabled by the technology (as suggested by Tristan Harris, one of the key figures in the film) might not be so constructive. Neither are those segments which emphasise that algorithms are likely to take control over human beings.

Having said that, this film has indeed successfully addressed the problems of the current business model around which social media is organised and embedded. Probably because many interviewees in the film are industry insiders, *The Social Dilemma* avoids a simplistic portrait of a singular 'evil industry'. Instead, it emphasises financial incentives and shareholder pressure. This paves the way for a deeper critique of the capitalist mode of production. Some of the film's interviewees highlight that the initial intentions of social media platforms, including the design of certain functions, were primarily aimed at enhancing social connectivity. This objective can and does inspire the creativity of many users. The problem is that this connectivity and users' creativity have become a rich resource from which private companies make profits (Van Dijck, 2013). More profoundly, the tracking of user online behaviour and the selling of user privacy are corollaries of a social media business model that is based on user-commodity, as Fuchs (2014) pointed out. As the title suggests, this film addresses this particular dilemma quite well.

However, one dilemma the film partly failed to address is the myth that 'there is no alternative'. While addressing the problem of social media capitalism, it does little more than name this seemingly critical problem. No alternative models are seriously considered or proposed. Towards the end of *The Social Dilemma*, some suggested alternatives are provided in relation to personal behaviour. Proposed individual remedies include: turn off the notification, do not store search histories, don't just accept what's pushed to you, use add-ons to remove recommendations, make sure to be exposed to different views, even if you don't agree with them, and so on. The film simply fails to provide more in-depth or serious discussions of alternatives. As a show produced by one of the largest online streaming platforms—Netflix—I have to say that this is a disappointing silence and weakness in the film.

This is hardly a problem of this film alone. In addition to the *The Social Dilemma*, the dark side of social media has been brought to public attention in recent years, partly thanks to popular works such as *Terms and Conditions May Apply* (2013), *Citizenfour* (2014), *The Cleaners* (2018), *The Great Hack* (2019), and *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019). If we talk to anyone on the streets today, it is easy to find people who hate what social media are doing with their data and who dislike the endless advertising and surveillance. However, their next sentence might be—'there is no choice'. The most prominent ideology in today's world is probably 'there is no alternative' (TINA) (Rehmann, 2014).

I would now like to move beyond the TINA view, implied by *The Social Dilemma* and similar cultural products, and to indicate that there are indeed significant alternatives to the current profit-driven capitalist model of social media. Broadly speaking, it is possible to describe three approaches.

The most widely accepted approach is regulation through laws. *The Social Dilemma* merely touched upon this point near the end of the film. In reality, several proposals have been made to protect users' data. They include the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Law Enforcement Directive in the EU [1]. There have been recent attempts to investigate and regulate large social media companies in America, such as the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) antitrust lawsuit against Facebook. The implementations and implications of these rules will need close and constant scrutiny.

Another approach is government intervention to socialise the economic growth and benefits brought by social media and new technologies. From an economic perspective, some researchers have emphasised the role public sectors play in the research and development (R&D) of technologies (Black and Keller, 2015; Mazzucato, 2011). Contrary to the conventional view that the

private sector takes risks while the government can only support in providing infrastructure, education and occasional regulation, Mazzucato's research reveals the crucial risk-taking role undertaken by the public sector in shaping and creating key technologies such as IT and biotech. However, the benefits of new technologies are mostly privatised by the private sector and companies. Therefore, she proposes mechanisms for the government to socialise the rewards by, for example, holding equity in strategically important companies. Other political economists, such as Thomas Piketty (2013), are proposing progressive taxation, in general, to redistribute income and wealth on a more equitable basis.

More revolutionary proposals maintain that a commons-based, public internet is necessary to transcend capitalism and to create a democratic public sphere (Atton, 2004; Barbrook, 1998, 2007; Fuchs, 2009; Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford, 2013). As Fuchs points out, the critical political economy of social media should not only analyse relevant themes of exploitation, commodification and ideology, such research should also keep a close eye on the potentials for alternatives and oppositional struggles (Fuchs, 2013). Proposals for a non-commercial, non-profit, and commons-based internet point to existing platforms such as Wikipedia and WikiLeaks which are supported by donations, open-source software, and public cooperation. They have the potential to go beyond the capitalist internet that is built on capital accumulation, exploitation of user labour, advertising, and the digital sublime.

In this respect, another documentary film, *The Internet's Own Boy* (2014), has bolder tones. By depicting the life story of the late computer programmer, hacker, online activist and political organiser Aaron Swartz, the film asks radical questions about the Creative Commons, Open Access, online intellectual property and piracy issues. In his Guerilla Open Access Manifesto, Swartz writes "we'll not just send a strong message opposing the privatisation of knowledge—we'll make it a thing of the past" [2]. It is notable that such radical objectives for collective action against the power relations of contemporary capitalism are totally absent in *The Social Dilemma*.

To avoid dystopia, collective will is probably not enough, a point raised at the end of *The Social Dilemma* by Justin Rosenstein, a former engineer at Facebook and Google and co-founder of Asana. What is more important is a 'collective will' that can be directed into collective actions. Without this, *The Social Dilemma* might become yet another 'cool' spectacle streamed on Netflix (McGuigan, 2007). As warned by another dystopian science-fiction drama, the *Fifteen Million Merits* episode of *Black Mirror*, even radical-seeming forms of dissent can be integrated and commodified by the current system. *The Social Dilemma* has succeeded in answering the question it asks at the beginning, i.e., what is the problem? Unfortunately, however, it ultimately fails to provide a real collective solution for radical change.

Authorb

Yuqi Na is a visiting lecturer at the University of Westminster. Her research focuses on the political economy of social media and the internet, digital discourse and ideologies.

Endnotes

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection/data-protection-eu_en

[2] <https://openipub.com/?pub=GuerrillaOpenAccessManifesto.html>

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