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KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON

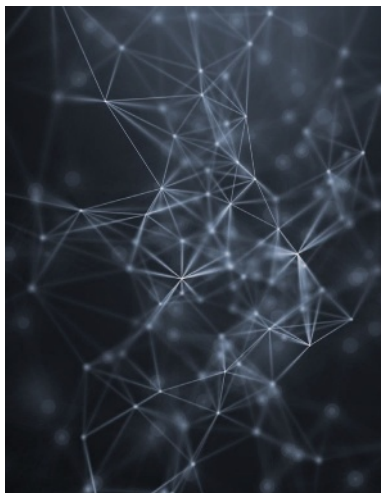


Joseph Carvalko

The British philosopher, G. E. Moore (1873–1958) in his seminal work *Principia Ethica* (1903), wrote that when considering what’s good or bad, we should begin by asking two questions: ought the thing under inquiry exist? And, as it concerns an action, how ought we act? Although “good” in and of itself may well be indefinable, asking these questions has a common sense ring, especially when deciding the myriad ethical questions that surround new technology (1). For example, Western nations have universally said “no” to germline modifications of the human genome, fearing that such actions might irreversibly affect the human race.¹ In other instances, the genie escapes before any international consensus can develop to stop it from becoming a reality. In 1945, atomic bombs decimated two Japanese cities killing nearly a quarter-million people. Only after a long string of hydrogen bomb detonations, over a period of nearly 20 years, were nuclear weapons banned as between the two major nuclear powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The ban expressed a “right action.”

Unlike permanent changes to the human genome or the proliferation of nuclear weapons, most technologies do not pose existential threats, but nonetheless call for regulation.

Defending Against Opaque Algorithmic Meddling in Free Elections



STATIONARYTRAVELLER/ISTOCK

Social media may be in this category. By 2019, more than half the population of Western Europe and more than a third of the population of the Middle East and North Africa will be using social networks (4), (5).¹ This represents a giant step toward actu-

alizing an aspiration of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech.” But, as social media serves to transform free speech the world over, a pervasive infiltration of the information highway is underway by individuals and entities using bots and human agencies to invade our privacy and channel extremist, hateful speech in propaganda-like campaigns bent on undermining democratic institutions (6).² Time has come to consider steps that balance privacy and speech rights with the right to choose leaders without foreign interference (7).

Broadly speaking, social media has been in existence for thousands of years, e.g., letter writing. Although the 19th century telegraph permitted two-way communication, its use was largely confined to business. It wasn’t until the 20th century that

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¹Article 13 of the Oviedo Convention bans all genetic modifications to the human germline. Also see, (2)–(3).

²Alleged Russian political meddling documented in 27 countries since 2004 (6).

radio and later television allowed a communal connection between broadcaster and audience. National and international regulation quickly followed these early wireless successes. Nearly simultaneous with radio, telephone networks established information flow, mainly between two parties. Again, regulation followed. But, not until the 21st century did social media platforms make it possible for billions of people to both broadcast and communicate between themselves. Yet, virtually no regulation exists. Should it, when it's become clear that recent elections and democratizing events in the Middle East, Europe and the U.S., suggest that social media and liberal democracy don't always point in the same direction?

Evgeny Morozov, in his 2011 critique of the Web's political ramifications asks, "What if the liberating potential of the Internet also contains the seeds of depoliticization and thus dedemocratization?" (8). We need look no further than the Iranian revolution of 2009, energized largely by Twitter and Facebook to protest what many Iranians considered a flawed presidential election (9). But, as demonstrators messaged via Twitter, the Iranian regime also used the Web, flush with data, to identify protesters, via photos and associated personal information. The regime then widely disseminated propaganda, which when combined with shootings, tear gassing and arrests, put the restive population into a state of paranoia, which resulted in tamping down the marches (10).

Unlike quelling incipient revolutions, the 2016 elections in the U.S. and the U.K. were seemingly tainted by covert operatives, who commanded social media platforms for purposes of altering the political result in two of the world's oldest democracies. In March 2018, The

Guardian reported that "The data analytics firm that worked with Donald Trump's election team and the winning Brexit campaign harvested millions of Facebook profiles of U.S. voters, in one of the tech giant's biggest ever data breaches, and used them to build a powerful software program to predict and influence choices at the ballot box" (11). This development has led U.K.'s Prime Minister, Theresa May, to call for the Information Commissioner to investigate the circumstances of one of the most egregious invasions of personal privacy in memory, which in this case apparently influenced the outcome of an election.

Democracies need both a free Internet and free speech, and judging from the election tampering that has occurred recently throughout Europe and the United States, time has come to consider instituting standards and global policies. These should be backed up by industry enforcement mechanisms, using both humans and AI, to defend against opaque algorithmic invasions of privacy and fabrication of propaganda. Social media platforms might begin by promising a robust transparency and accountability, where recognized international watchdog agencies can identify incidents of electoral maladministration, and insure that the aggrieved have an opportunity to be heard and to join activities when justified, i.e., to stop the infringement of the right to choose one's political destiny without meddling. Yes, social media is a fact of life, but ought we act now to enforce electoral norms, what G.E. Moore likely would have agreed is undeniably "good?"

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