RE(DE)FUND SOCIAL MEDIA

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If one looks at social media as a public health issue, it's clear that these huge networks hosting billions of participants are doing intense damage to the collective mental health and physical safety of the societies in which those billions live. (See "Facebook is a Doomsday Machine" by Adrienne LaFrance in *The Atlantic*.)

Solutions have been proposed: Jeremy Corbyn of the Labour Party in England has talked about a publicly owned social media platform while others recommend varying degrees of regulation to rein in the algorithms and profits of the social media oligarchy.

None of this will work if the goal is to create social media platforms that, at least, do no harm to those who use them as well as to the rest of those who don't use them but have to suffer the collateral damages nonetheless.

Let's assume that the current social media platforms serve some social good (a debatable point, but let's attest to its truth for the moment), "good" in this situation defined as providing quick and seamless ways for more people to connect in more ways, thus increasing social communication, emotional well-being and increasing solidarity among diverse peoples.

Let's assume also that the primary reason these companies are in the game is to make profit. Assuming this means that we can disregard Zuckerbergian palaver that their true mission is to serve the greater good by providing a global agora for sharing or acting as defenders of the First Amendment and so on and so on.

Let's also assume that billions of people join up became they get some a benefit out of it that is more positive than negative, more enjoyable than worrisome.

One of the problems with the current structure is that it costs nothing to join in (in money terms—datawise is a different story) and therefore doesn't cost anybody anything if they do something that damages someone else.

(Yes, Facebook employs large armies of people to filter content to mitigate any harms, and, yes, those armies cost the business, but those armies are largely contractors not a part of the Facebook workforce and often not even working in the United States, so how serious is Facebook's investment in the process if it cares little to nothing about the people hired to make it work? And besides, the cost to Facebook for this kind of theater is not very much when measured against its revenue.)

In other words, people don't have any real skin in the game and thus do not have to take a risk with all of its possible losses. It is a parasitical model of attachment, not entrepreneurial at all, and Facebook's profits are essentially rents earned from occupying the commons of people's data.

If regulators want to exert regulation over these social media regimes, the only way to do it is by using the only coin of the realm that matters, that is, actual coinage: they need to engineer some financial pain points for the companies and their users.

First, bring suits against the charters of these companies and threaten to time-limit them if the companies don't take certain actions. (When charters were first used to form corporations, they were awarded by the state and often had time limits attached to them, in essence saying, "The people will give you permission for a certain amount of time to make your profits or suffer your losses, and then you're done." The important point was that charters came *from the people*; they were not divine grants with unlimited lifespans.)

What might those actions be? I'm sure people more inventive than I could come up with brilliant suggestions, but how about a subscription fee from every user to join the service? It could be scalable for people and organizations of different means, but however it's laid out, everyone would have to pay something to be on the system.

And not just a one-time fee. You pay for it as long as you use it (and if a person ends having a zombie Facebook account, like me, you would still pay for it until you affirmatively end the relationship) There are already in place systems for micro-payments like these, so the charges could be done daily.

Facebook and others would also pay users generously for using their data. The subscription fee is not a waiver for the companies to use the data however they wish.

Users could opt-out of this arrangement, in essence saying, I want to use your services, for which I will pay, but I don't want you to use my data.

Every posting on a platform would involve a transaction fee, in the same way there have been proposals for transaction fees in stock trades. Who pays the fee? I'm sure the brilliant talent in each company (whose executives have been telling us is unlike any talent anywhere in the world, which is why it needs to be compensated so handsomely) can figure this out. Who would get the fee? The government, of course.

Others far wiser than I can come up with even more schemes and variations. But the point here is that this regulation is not of speech or ideas, which in at least an American context is completely impossible because of the First Amendment and our dangerous notions of personal individuality, but of the money being exchanged, which is the only thing the companies care about. Let's stop trying to parse what is and isn't "hate speech" and all such unrewarding intellectual enterprises along with the equally fruitless efforts at drawing up ethics for people to follow.

Instead, go for the wallet (digital, of course, in these times) and make everyone involved, from hate-speaking Hindus in India to hate-speaking boogaloo bois in the United States and everyone in between, pay a price for what they do.

Make that price substantial (it has to hurt at least a little to be a part of the club) and persistent so that people's behaviors will change and politicians and others will be relieved of having to make calls to people's better angels that always—and embarrassingly—fail.

Perhaps then the influence of social media will wither down to a tolerable hum of old high school chums reconnecting and knitting clubs exchanging row patterns and professionals posting sedate messages on bulletin boards and people sharing photographs (for which the sharers would get paid if the company wants to use them to train AI face recognition systems). Or perhaps they might wither away altogether, and would that be such a grave loss outside the bubbleverse of Silicon Valley techies and their financial pushermen?

People have always managed to find ways to network themselves. They don't need privatized surveillance systems like Facebook to do it for them, and the society as a whole certainly doesn't need another set of overlords to kowtow to.

But if the choice is to have them rather than expel them, then make everyone who uses them pay dearly both for the internal services they use and the external damages they cause because, by using these media, they are all complicit in doing more harm than good and bringing more misery than majesty to our commonwealth.