

BOOKS

**FACEBOOK SOCIETY:
LOSING OURSELVES IN
SHARING OURSELVES**

by Roberto Simanowski; Susan H. Gillespie, trans. Columbia University Press, New York, U.S.A., 2018. 296 pp. Trade. ISBN: 978-0231182720.

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According to Roberto Simanowski, the author of *Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves*, this volume isn't a book about Facebook. Rather his concern is what he calls Facebook society. His starting point is Facebook's claim that it is building a "global community," and his underlying assumption is that social media platforms have altered social interaction, political life and outlooks on the world, even for people who do not regularly use them. Bringing boundless enthusiasm to how Facebook and other social apps create community, this cultural studies perspective both celebrates networked society and offers a critique of problematic elements derived from digital communities, with a particular focus on our concept of the self.

Simanowski articulates a number of rationales for why people get involved in these communities within a world where people are frequently immersed in their multiple devices. His driving idea is that it is too late to dismiss Facebook as a fraud even if Facebook society is a society of immediacy, impatience and immersion. This brings him to ask why and how Facebook persuades its users to publicize their private lives. He con-

cludes that there are several answers: It is cool, it offers the feeling of being a public person, one can communicate with minimal interaction, one can engage with different groups on different themes, and users can gain a broad sense of being connected to many communities. Nonetheless, as he explains,

we need to understand Facebook as the answer to a problem that perturbs the (post)modern subject more or less consciously. It must be understood as the symptom of a cultural evolution that should be thought through the lens of a philosophy of history and should not be too quickly reduced to scenarios of political oppression or economic exploitation. The political-economic consequences of the Facebook system lie deeper. For one thing, through the accumulation and analysis of personal data, Facebook generates knowledge as a tool of domination; in this way, it advances the process of commercialization. For another thing, through its invitation to a kind of experience of the self that is reflexively impoverished, it produces the very subjects who are no longer dismayed by this process (p. xiv).

Despite the mention of commercialization, Simanowski is more focused on how social tools remake our self-image, emphasizing social networks and diary apps. He frames this in a number of ways. First, he sees sharing on Facebook as a stop-gap that gives us a decent option for delegating our own experiences to others. He also claims that self-representation on Facebook happens less in a way that is narratively reflec-

tive than as a spontaneously episodic and documentary event. One outcome is that the autobiographic narrative Facebook produces as one engages is essentially a narrative in which the authority is the network's algorithms. Simanowski characterizes this type of self-image narrative as pointillist, postmodern and posthuman. Finally, he claims that information management on Facebook and on the Internet suppresses collective memory. A point that comes up often is how our new "tools" encourage users to engage in more or less unconscious and unreflective self-narration, a modality that favors implicit over explicit self-revelation. The medium is the message!

This type of behavior, we learn, prefers mechanical presentation, via photography or automated sharing, to mindful representations via textual statements and narrative structure. Because exchange is spontaneous, episodic and documentary,

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it is typically not characterized as deliberate and coherent. Similarly, what the author calls an automatic autobiography or posthuman self-description is not a form in which the subject is authoring their own story. Instead, given the technology, the actual narrators are the network and its algorithms. This works well for a company (Facebook) whose only product is the data it collects to sell to others.

Admittedly, I found the book a somewhat bumpy ride. While the excursions into cultural history were excellent, the litany of software apps discussed didn't grab me since, despite being my own IT specialist, I've never used many of them. Readers who are really wired in will no doubt like the riffs on Second Life, MySpace, Snapchat, Weibo, etc. Sections on Facebook's back end and hypocrisy were useful, because it was my concerns about Facebook's data collection that brought me to the book in the first place. Perhaps this is why, admittedly, I found the author's view of Facebook addiction as disheartening as I did his assumptions about Facebook society as a new social reality.

In concrete terms, the thesis that Facebook only provides the technical realization of new social norms is not defensible, considering that Facebook has repeatedly imposed or attempted to impose innovations without any need on the part of its users, and partially against their will (p. 19).

The book does ask good, critical questions about Facebook's role in our lives and offers a critical point of view that is nicely interwoven with Foucault's idea of *dispositif* (or how discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions are connected). He also integrates Siegfried Kracauer's (1889–1966) theories on memory and the idea that memory is under threat and challenged by

modern forms of technology. Other thinkers he draws on include Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Given how quickly things change, readers may want to start with the epilogue to the English edition to place the argument. The book was originally released in Germany in 2016, with the English edition coming out in 2018. The epilogue is an effort to speak about how the volume fits within a world where our relationship to technology is as fast-moving as the technology itself. About the time the book's English edition was released, Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg had just released "the next big thing," Facebook Live. Simanowski sees it as a benefit, a logical step in Facebook development. The product was promoted as allowing for the sharing of raw and visceral content:

Spontaneity and immediacy function here as synonyms for authenticity; they are the counterpart to frictionless sharing. . . . These new features confirm the prognosis of this book that the type of self-representation to which social networks increasingly seduce us provides less and less content for our own self-reflection and self-understanding and more and more reliable material for the algorithms at the back end of the interface. . . . In essence, we increasingly cease to be the authors of our own autobiographies (p. 162).

This commentary struck me as somewhat weird because, as I write, Facebook is reexamining the livestream system in light of how the grisly 15 March 2019 Christchurch shooting in two mosques took advantage of this distribution option. Even more unnerving is how Facebook's systems worked when it landed there. The first removal of the terrorist attack clocked in 29 minutes after the broadcast began and 12 minutes after the massacre ended. This was because it wasn't flagged immediately. According to Facebook, had it been flagged while the feed was live, they

might have moved faster to remove it. Equally unsettling is that Facebook said it removed 1.5 million videos of footage from the shooting rampage within 24 hours of the attack, underscoring the massive game of whack-a-mole social media giants have to play when questionable content hits their platforms [1]. All of this only underscores a larger problem. Since being introduced, the live feature has recorded multiple crimes, deaths and violent incidents, all bringing significant media attention to the complexities social networking has added to community interfaces.

Additionally, as someone who deleted a barely used Facebook account in 2018, after the Cambridge Analytica data mining scandal was revealed, I clearly am not a part of the cohort this book is representing. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, just one of many recent Facebook scandals, also broke about the time the English edition of this book was released. Essentially, the problem was that Facebook allowed Cambridge Analytica to harvest data of an estimated 87 million users [2]. So, while this book's assumption is that hardly anyone escapes from Facebook, recent reports show many deleted Facebook accounts after the Cambridge Analytica incident [3]. Aspects of this event highlight that Facebook society is a part of a technological confluence; a number of technology platforms mine our data. I see the Facebook model as one of the most egregious because its only product is really our data. I wish the book had paired Facebook's business model with those of other technology options that seem of more value to me, like Google Search and Wikipedia. Suffice it to say, this book's Facebook focus didn't change my thinking on the problems I associate with its core mission. Rather, the volume underscored the platform's popularity without fully inscribing its problems within the larger technological space.

Obviously, this book couldn't possibly address events that began after its publication, a problem long associated with offline publishing. Yet,

as someone who is less enthusiastic about social networking than many, recent events have left me wondering if there is a real and compelling need for many of the options promoted to collect the data gathered from us to resell. This book did not sufficiently address this reality. Rather it speaks more about a Facebook that serves as social glue for untold millions. This is the platform that connects people with shared interests globally as it offers connectivity to dispersed family groups, lonely old people, young flibbertigibbets and individuals within marginalized groups. Remote islanders and those working in distant locations are also among those who find community through their screens. So, whereas the social networking features and the type of biographical or narrative information Facebook offers has always seemed limited to me, here it is more or less broadly presented as who we are now.

Finally, the title of this book, *Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves*, brings to mind one of my favorite books: Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Originally published in 1985, Postman's groundbreaking polemic spoke about the corrosive effects of television on politics and the public discourse. Even before social networking and the Internet, Postman clearly and concisely argued that entertainment media had created a society in which images, sound bites and biased views of reality had replaced critical thinking [4]. As Simanowski puts it:

Could our hope lie in the return of the old, to resume its seat at the table alongside the new? The linking of the numerical and the narrative, of algorithmic analysis and hermeneutical techniques, is the contemporary topic in the realm that falls most essentially to hermeneutics and narration: the humanities. The catchword for a humanities that would be dedicated to algorithmic methods of analysis is "digital humanities" (p. 154).

To my mind, the digital humanities model outlined by Simanowski

doesn't comprehensively address the types of problems related to critical thinking that Postman presciently introduced. Both books do agree that the humanities deserve more attention at this time. To its credit, *Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves* brings some critical commentary to the place of humanities in our era. It is also worth noting the excellent translation. This book is superbly written, and I'm sure Susan H. Gillespie, the translator, deserves great credit for conveying this in English.

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