

Chapter 4

Regulating Tech Is Only Half of the Job



...[the] ‘engagement-based ranking’—the system within Facebook more commonly known as ‘the algorithm’-that chooses which posts, out of thousands of options, to rank at the top of users’ feeds is [in Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen’s words] doomed to amplify the worst in us...¹

Nonetheless, as important and necessary as it is, regulating Tech is at best only half of the job. The fundamental issue is that we need Technologists who have a deep appreciation and understanding of the Humanities and Social Sciences, and Humanists and Social Scientists who have an equally deep appreciation and understanding of Technology.

Once again, there is no better example of the need than the fact that there were no simulations of all the systems that would be affected by Covid 19. It cannot be emphasized enough that Epidemiologists have been warning for years of the serious possibilities of major Pandemics and have thus done numerous simulations for them. But to my knowledge, no one has proposed let alone performed simulations with regard to how the Economy, Mental Health of Children and the Population as a Whole, Nursing Homes, Schools, Working Conditions, and so forth would not only be seriously affected, but impact each other. For instance, no one contemplated how due to unsafe working conditions and the constant stress of dealing with those suffering from the Virus, Nurses and Pharmaceutical Technicians would quit their jobs in droves.

The point is that Pandemics are not under any obligation to respect the ways in which we’ve “organized”, better yet “disorganized”, the world.

If ever an organization needed to be regulated, it’s Facebook. Recent articles in both The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal paint a picture of an organization that is a menace in every which way.² Stronger still, as unlikely as it is, it needs to be thoroughly dismantled. At the very least, the entire senior leadership

¹Text.

²Mike Issac, “A Quandary At Facebook Over Its Tools,” The New York Times, Tuesday, October 26, 2021, pp. A1 and A 15.

needs to be replaced. Unfortunately, without changing the underlying culture, even this will not suffice in getting it to behave responsibly.

What makes Facebook so egregious is that it knew for certain that its policies were putting the lives of young girls directly at risk by how it portrayed their looks and bodies and thus encouraged them to be. By relentlessly and unfairly comparing themselves to others, they were subjected to endless amounts of shaming. Saddest of all, it led to reported attempts of suicide.

Once again, it cannot be emphasized enough that it bears major responsibility for aiding and abetting the spread of false information about the vaccines.

But Facebook's egregious behavior goes far beyond its policies alone. Its very operating mechanisms were explicitly designed to hook users. It does it by deliberately feeding endless cycles of messages that play upon their users' insecurities thereby shaming them endlessly. In short, its algorithms were deliberately designed to provoke and thus amplify the most harmful and dangerous attitudes and behaviors.

Even when the dire effects of its policies were brought repeatedly to the attention of senior management by subordinates, Facebook persisted in its irresponsible behavior. No matter how they were obtained, profits trumped everything else.³

From being a prime distributor of Dis and Misinformation, allowing Conspiracy Theories to run rampant, providing a vehicle for the direct interference in our elections, Facebook is the epitome of the Socially Irresponsible Organization. It's lacking in any deep sense of Ethical Responsibility.

The "bottom line" is that self-regulation is not only a "joke," but a complete failure.

This only raises the thorny question regarding what can and cannot be regulated. There is no question that harmful behavior and policies can. But at best that's only half of the issue. The remaining components are not only just as critical, but go far beyond regulation per se.

First and foremost is the underlying Ideology upon which Tech rests. It's what I call The Technological Mindset.⁴ Fundamental is the core belief that Technology is the solution to all of our problems, including those created by Technology itself. As such, it must be as free and as unencumbered as possible so that it can do its essential job of reinventing the future including the total redesign of our bodies and minds. Technologists need therefore to focus only on the positive benefits of their marvelous inventions. The negatives are the province of others. Talk about critical arguments that need challenging!

All of this is of course bolstered by the Psycho-Social Development of Technologists, or more accurately it's lack thereof. Technology is primarily a "Young Person's game." I say "Young-Person" deliberately. For having been involved with STEM my entire academic career, I've observed the arrested development of far too many Technologists. They are virtually unable and unwilling to

³Sheera Frankel and Cecilia Kang, *An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for Domination*, Harper, New York, 2021.

⁴Ian I. Mitroff, *Technology Run Amok: Crisis Management in the Digital Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2019.

think of the Negative, Unintended Consequences of their work, let alone how their marvelous creations will be deliberately abused and misused by nefarious actors for despicable purposes.

Putting together those with similar attitudes into tight-knit groups and organizations only reinforces such immature attitudes and irresponsible behavior. It's directly responsible for the creation of organizations whose Cultures are the epitome of Social Irresponsibility. The result is a continual stream of highly Unethical behavior.

While actions and policies can and should be regulated, the other key components unfortunately cannot. To change the mindset of Technologists requires a massive overhaul of the curricula that are the underlying basis of STEM. By insisting that Ethics be a key component of every course, the hope is that this will help hasten the Psycho-Social development of Technologists. In this regard, the Humanities and Social Sciences are equally critical. They need as well to be key components of every course as well.

Changing the culture of Tech organizations, especially those currently in existence, is another matter. It's estimated that Culture is responsible for up to 80% and more of what goes on in organizations.⁵ It dictates what're regarded as acceptable topics for discourse and how to talk about them, how to defer to superiors, how to dress, etc. More often than not, it means going along with behaviors and policies that violate one's deepest convictions. Such is the power of groups and our need to belong.

Because the changes required are so many and so difficult, we can expect Tech companies to keep doing more of the same. But in doing so, they are their own worst enemy. They are the biggest factor prompting their undoing.

Finally, while this chapter has focused primarily on Technology and Tech organizations, the very same issues apply generally to individuals and organizations of all kinds. The groups to which we belong and thereby impact our lives are insistent in reinforcing what they regard as acceptable attitudes and behavior. Especially in today's world, the arguments/claims of the first two chapters are made even more powerful by virtue of their being reinforced constantly via Social Media.

Reflections

How do the arguments and ideas of the chapter strike you? Are they overly critical of Technology? Are they fair, unfair? Why, why not? Can you put your reactions in the form of a Toulmin Argument-Based Structure? How would the different Myers-Briggs Types respond?

⁵Ian I. Mitroff and Ralph H. Kilmann, *The Psychodynamics of Enlightened Leadership: Coping with Chaos*, Springer, New York, 2021.

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