


The Internet as a Democratic Hellscape: How Social Media Violates Natural Law

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ABSTRACT: This paper applies John Locke's political philosophy to analyze the 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, highlighting the harms of spreading misinformation in the digital sphere. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* serves as a theoretical lens to explore how social media sites represent a facade of an impartial third party, when in reality they inflict harm upon the user by violating their liberty, and subsequently natural law as a whole. Using the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal as a case study, this essay argues that social media sites knowingly allow the spread of misinformation, which ultimately harms users in realms that extend beyond the digital. This paper urges users to be aware of social media sites' complacency in spreading misinformation and of the threats that misinformation poses to social and political life. The paper urges users of social media sites to play an active role in shaping digital spheres into spaces that can be used to craft positive change in social and political life.

KEYWORDS: social media, social contract, democracy, public sphere, surveillance, digital privacy



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In the highly influential political text, *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke establishes how just civil societies are formed.¹ Locke proposes the idea that the state of nature is one where all individuals are free and equal. He argues that there is a natural law which governs the state of nature. This law of nature is a set of objective moral rules, that apply to everyone, even when a formal government is absent. The law of nature is an innate feeling which teaches us that, “being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.”² The state of nature rests on the foundation of mutual love among all people, upholding each individual’s natural rights to life, liberty, health and property.³

However, Locke acknowledges that the state of nature is precarious because there is no guarantee that all individuals will abide by the law of nature. In the state of nature, individuals live in a condition of fear and insecurity due to the constant threat of harm from outside parties. Consequently, Locke argues that a civil government must be formed to protect the natural rights of citizens. Thus, individuals consent to enter a social contract with an impartial third party to create a civil society. Essentially, individuals relinquish some rights and freedoms to obtain guaranteed protection and enjoyment of natural law. Although Locke focuses on describing the conditions for a just society in the context of traditional governments and social structures, his overarching theories can be extrapolated to contemporary social and political contexts.

Analyzing the social and political interactions on social media sites provides powerful insights into how an unjust civil society can manifest in an increasingly digital world. As the twenty-first century has progressed, technological advancements have rapidly increased. In the late 1990s, the Internet was essentially in a fetal state — its vast and open nature fostering optimistic ideas of a novel democratic space.⁴ In the mid to late 2000s, the rise of social media sites like Facebook allowed users to generate and absorb content at unprecedented speeds, furthering scholarly faith in the use of the internet as a democratizing force.⁵ However, more recently, other scholars have argued that these same novel technological

features can be used to consolidate the power of authoritarian regimes.⁶

This essay will use John Locke's conditions for a just and civil society to critically analyze the 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, and subsequently apply these findings to social media sites as a whole. The paper will first argue that many digital citizens use social media sites, like Facebook, as forums to collectively identify and discuss social issues — causing users to conceptualize social media sites as impartial third parties. It will then show that Facebook failed to adequately protect natural law as it knowingly promoted misinformation on its site. It will then argue that this violation of natural law renders Facebook an illegitimate third party, which harms its users. Using the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal as a case study, the paper will contend that it is unjust for social media sites to facilitate the spread of misinformation.

First, it is necessary to show that the unique communication format on social media holds great potential for social and political discussion and that many users realize this potential. Social media serves as a platform for users to share content and interact with one another. On social media sites, users can share content for a variety of reasons, whether to disseminate information or simply for amusement. However, the rapid and widespread flow of information contributes significantly to the potential for social and political discussion. Brown argues that online forums can facilitate democratic public speech, citing examples of social movements such as Idle No More that gained traction on social media.⁷ Though scholars like Brown hold optimistic views about the democratizing potential of the Internet, others like Morozov take a more critical approach, pointing out that “social media platforms can be used intensively for manipulation purposes” by state and non-state actors.⁸

Despite disagreements among scholars regarding the Internet's democratizing potential, both sides agree that social media sites serve as spheres for social and political discussions. From organizing protests to politically charged memes, social media is rife with content about social and political life. In the contemporary

moment, many users are privy to the bias they may encounter when browsing social media and interacting with others.⁹ However, many users remain unaware of how these platforms manipulate them. Social media platforms harvest and sell user data, allowing it to be weaponized to push specific agendas. Users often see social media sites as impartial third parties, not expecting an underlying bias. While users understand the risks of encountering misinformation, they generally do not expect platforms to knowingly aid in spreading targeted misinformation to vulnerable populations.

Before analyzing the effects of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, it is necessary to provide a brief background on the event. In March 2018, news broke that the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica had harvested personal data from 87 million Facebook user accounts without their knowledge.¹⁰ Cambridge Analytica used this data to create targeted marketing databases and sold them to political campaigns for advertising purposes.¹¹ Cambridge Analytica's algorithm employed advanced pattern recognition to create psychological profiles of users. Based on content users had 'liked,' Cambridge Analytica gathered private and sensitive user information to make strong predictions about which political party that user would vote for.¹² This information was used to deploy ads rife with misinformation (BBC video) and targeted toward populations identified as vulnerable or susceptible for numerous global political campaigns, including Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 and the pro-Brexit campaign 'Leave.EU' in 2015.¹³

As an impartial third party, the relationship between Facebook and its users is similar to Locke's social contract theory. When someone signs up for Facebook, they agree to the party's privacy policy — a document disclosing how Facebook collects and uses user data. The privacy policy is akin to Locke's idea of a social contract because digital citizens consent to relinquish some rights and freedoms, such as data about the content they interact with, in exchange for others, like the ability to engage in social and political discussion.¹⁴ In line with Locke's idea of tacit consent, users continue to 'silently' consent to this contract by continuing to use Facebook. Only once a user closes their account this contract is broken, and

Facebook no longer has access to the user's data. However, this social contract is only just if it protects the natural rights of each person.¹⁵

Facebook's social contract is corrupt because it exploits the consent of digital citizens to violate natural law by deceiving and manipulating its users. In a civil society, that is, one wherein a social contract has established an impartial third party, Locke defines liberty as:

...freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it. A liberty to follow my own will in all things where that rule prescribes, not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man.¹⁶

Thus, even when individuals agree to a social contract, such a contract is unjust if individuals are subject to another person or group's whims. This constitutes a violation of liberty, failing to uphold natural law on the part of the impartial third party.

On Facebook, users agree to the privacy policy to use the site, rendering the entity of Facebook into an impartial third party that holds all users to the same standard or set of rules (e.g. no hate speech, no nudity, etc.). However, before 2018, Facebook freely granted mobile developers, such as Cambridge Analytica extensive access to user data without disclosing this to its users.¹⁷ In this way, Facebook not only failed to hold all actors to the same standards but also deceived users about the terms of its social contract. By failing to disclose how user data was collected and used in its privacy policy, Facebook subjected its users to the unknown will of Cambridge Analytica, which used this data to manipulate users through political campaigns filled with misinformation.¹⁸ Thus, Facebook violated the liberty of its users by subjecting them to the unknown will of Cambridge Analytica.

The effects of these liberty violations extend beyond the digital realm to influence and harm the life and health of digital citizens in the 'real world'. For example, Cambridge Analytica was involved in the 2015 Brexit 'Leave.EU' campaign.¹⁹ Cambridge Analytica's targeted ads functioned as part of the campaign's

propaganda machine to sway individual political views, ultimately contributing to the success of Brexit. Brexit introduced significant trade barriers in the UK, resulting in economic difficulties that trickled down to the individual level.²⁰ Thus, the digital infringements of liberty which informed the creation of ‘fake news’ political campaigns impacted the ‘real’ lives and health of British citizens by damaging the economy. Tangible, real-world consequences on the lives of individuals can be traced back to violations of natural law in the digital world.

Through Locke’s lens, the deception and manipulation that permeates Facebook transforms the site into a contemporary, digital form of an illegitimate government. For Locke, a legitimate government is an impartial third party that upholds natural law and works towards the common good of society. Locke states that “... no rational creature can be supposed to change his condition with an intention to be worse.”²¹ An individual only enters into a social contract with a third party because they believe the agreement will make them better off. Facebook users believe that using the site will create better conditions for numerous reasons (e.g. communication, creative pursuits, access to information etc.). In actuality, users are made worse off because their natural rights have been violated.

Although people are technically free to leave the site at any time, they do not feel a need to leave the site because they are blind to any infringements upon their liberty and the harms that may arise from such. When users are not aware of the conditions they have agreed upon to use a site like Facebook, they cannot make free and informed decisions because they lack the necessary information to do so. This is the most striking way that Facebook violates the liberty of their users — by robbing them of their agency.

Similarly, Cambridge Analytica robbed users of their agency by intentionally feeding them misinformation about social and political life. Democracy can only flourish with the active and truthful involvement of citizens. Misinformation jeopardizes its success by confusing or deterring voters from making informed decisions and skewing the views of political opponents. In both instances, the user

or citizen is not equipped with the tools and knowledge to become an agent over their own life, which is unjust.

After 2018 and the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, many social media sites have updated their policies to be more transparent with how user data is collected and used. However, misinformation is still rampant across social media sites.²² As Forbes reports, “A 2021 report from the online advocacy group Avaaz found that, in the eight months leading up to the [2020 US] election, Facebook could have stopped the 10.1 billion estimated view of misinformation from top-performing pages on its site.” The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal is merely one case study to examine the threats posed by the spread of misinformation on social media sites. Although social media sites like Facebook are just one part of the misinformation machine, they are the most dangerous because they have the most power when it comes to protecting users from violations of their liberty but time and time again, they fail to do so.

Locke asserts that if a government is legitimate, it upholds the natural rights of citizens and therefore deserves obedience. However, when a government is illegitimate (i.e. has violated natural law), individuals have the right to resist and reform a government that is just and legitimate. Thus, digital citizens have a right to resist and rebel against the ‘illegitimate governments’ that social media sites represent. If policymakers and social media giants are not taking meaningful steps to protect users from misinformation, it is time for users themselves to take action and make changes.

However, resistance is only possible with collective awareness. Though beyond the scope of this paper to argue for a specific methodology of resistance, this paper uses a Lockean viewpoint to lay the groundwork for understanding the harms that social media sites inflict on users when facilitating the spread of misinformation. Through collective awareness, resistance becomes a tangible option, and individuals can work towards building just communities in the digital world. Whether one believes in the democratizing potential of the Internet or wants to avoid harm from authoritarian regimes, these outcomes can only be actualized if there

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is intentional and critical thought behind the creation and regulation of digital public spheres.

Notes

- ¹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1823).
- ² Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 107.
- ³ Locke, 106-107.
- ⁴ Kyle Brown, “Public Spheres in Private Spaces: How Capital Will Stop the Web’s Democratic Potential,” *The McMaster Journal of Communication* 10 (March 13, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.15173/mjc.v10i0.282>, 76.
- ⁵ Brown, “Public Spheres”, 77.
- ⁶ YERLİKAYA, TURGAY, and SECA TOKER ASLAN. “Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era: The Manipulation of Politics in the Election Process.” *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 2 (2020): 177–96. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918129>, 179.
- ⁷ Brown, 75.
- ⁸ YERLİKAYA, TURGAY, and SECA TOKER ASLAN, “Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era”, 179.
- ⁹ Reilly, Meg Little. “Facebook Is Still Top Social Platform for News but Users Are Wary, Pew Finds.” *Forbes*, February 16, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/meglittlereilly/2024/02/15/facebook-is-still-no-1-social-media-site-for-news-but-users-are-wary/>.
- ¹⁰ Aja Romano, “The Facebook Data Breach Wasn’t a Hack. It Was a Wake-up Call.,” *Vox*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/17138756/facebook-data-breach-cambridge-analytica-explained>.
- ¹¹ Romano, “Facebook Data Breach”
- ¹² Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, “How Cambridge Analytica Turned Facebook ‘Likes’ into a Lucrative Political Tool,” *The Guardian* (*The Guardian*, March 17, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/17/facebook-cambridge-analytica-kogan-data-algorithm>.
- ¹³ Romano.
- ¹⁴ BBC, “Facebook’s Data-Sharing Deals Exposed,” *BBC News*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46618582>.
- ¹⁵ Locke.

¹⁶ Locke, 114.

¹⁷ Romano; Cadwallar and Graham-Harrison, “Cambridge Analytica.”

¹⁸ Wylie, Christopher. “Cambridge Analytica Planted Fake News.” *BBC News*, March 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-43472347>.

¹⁹ Romano.

²⁰ Jonathan Portes, “The Impact of Brexit on the UK Economy: Reviewing the Evidence,” CEPR (Vox EU, July 7, 2023), <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/impact-brexit-uk-economy-reviewing-evidence>.

²¹ Locke, 161.

²²Reilly, “Facebook Is Still Top Social Platform for News”

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