

How Facebook Fractures Elections

By Michael Eisele and Lionel Fray

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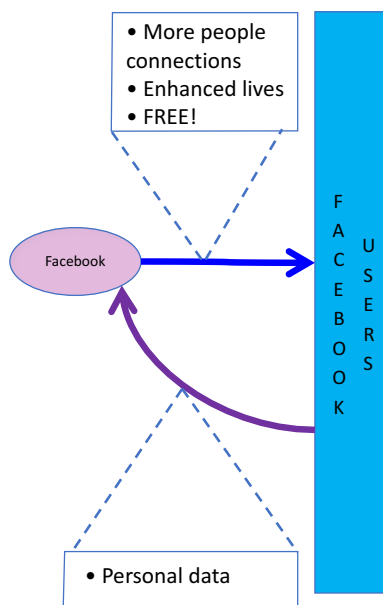
Even if Facebook does a great job policing Russian election interference in the future, the **Facebook Vice Cycle** will continue to spread misinformation and polarize the electorate, to the detriment of the US and other democracies.

Facebook and the Russians

Facebook, making use of the then-new technology of the internet, initially saw its mission as a beneficial social network that allowed people to expand their number of friends and the pace and extent of conversations among them. In that sense, it viewed itself as a platform that would enhance American and other countries' basic values. To its users it delivered attractive values that appeared to be free, though there was a cost that most users were not aware of—detailed user information that turned out to have substantial commercial value.

Figure 1 shows value flows to and from a market (Facebook Users). It's a graphical expression of Facebook's original Social Model, called a ValueMap¹

Facebook Social Model



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1

Figure 1 Facebook Social Model

But as with other new technologies, there have been unexpected and unintended consequences.

Recent reporting has focused on Russia's use of Facebook to influence the 2016 US elections. After the election, Facebook eventually conceded that at least 3,000 Russian-bought political ads were placed on its site². Russian-bought ads did not mention candidates. The ads used issues like race, immigration and gun rights to instill and drive conflict. Facebook later announced new preventative steps for transparency and accountability that may or may not prevent similar abuses in the future.

In February 2018, the U.S. Justice Department indicted 13 Russians for election interference. Joel Kaplan, Facebook's vice president of global policy, said in a statement that the company was grateful the government was taking action "against those who abused our service and exploited the openness of our democratic process."

In July 2018, the Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, interviewed by Kara Swisher of Recode said, "The evidence that we've seen is quite clear, that the Russians did try to interfere with the election," Zuckerberg told Swisher. "These are real things. These aren't things that someone made up. We went out, we traced [Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency] activity, not only through what they've tried to do in the U.S., but we've traced that activity back to trying to manipulate culture and news in Russia itself," Zuckerberg said. "What we've detected through our systems are actually essentially the same thing as the IRA. All the people who are running them are the same."³

From the Facebook statements and actions, one could assume that Facebook would be diligent in the 2018 midterms and beyond, and U.S. elections would get back to 'normal'. Unfortunately, even if Facebook were successful in limiting Russian interference, it will still be disrupting the democratic process. Here's how.

America's Political Tribes

Since its founding, the American "melting pot experiment" has been different from those of most other governments, where subscribing to a basic set of values enumerated in a written Constitution—including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and a fair treatment of all under the law—has been an ideal designed to unite people of all faiths, cultures, and backgrounds. Being "American" superseded other affiliations. In more recent years, however, the melting process appears to have slowed. Political Tribalism has developed and some new kinds of tribes have appeared.

Mike Eisele had an illustrative experience.

This spring, while visiting my daughter, a middle school teacher in Oklahoma, I was invited with her to a colleague's backyard barbecue. I had never met the host, her colleague's husband, a retired police officer. Our friendly chat about sports, Corvettes, and beer suddenly shifted with the host's question to me. "Where are you from?" My response, "Oregon" was followed by a

too-long pause. Then he continued. "I thought you were a conservative. Oregon is a marijuana state" His face tightened and his eyes bore down on me. I replied quickly, deflecting confrontation about my personal views. "I live in central Oregon, the ranching and farming area. The Portland and the Willamette Valley population centers decided the marijuana issue." That answer stopped the questioning, but not his suspicions. I excused myself and moved on to backyard food.

America today has moved beyond identity politics to Political Tribes. Litmus tests, like living in Oregon, abound. If you are a member of a tribe, you support your fellow members. You are suspicious of and may even attack non-members if they intrude on your feelings of "what is yours" or "who we are" or "whom you feel loyal to," especially if these feelings are not entirely conscious.

In her new book, *Political Tribes*, Amy Chua asserts that America must rediscover a national identity that transcends our political tribes. She thinks false slogans of unity are really another form of divisiveness. She argues for a new honesty that acknowledges the reality of group differences.

Recent polling finds that a majority of white Americans — including about two-thirds of whites without college degrees and three-fourths of white Republicans — believe there is discrimination against white people in America today. Whites, Christians and other traditionally predominant groups are developing their own narratives of beleaguered solidarity and group victimhood.

Tribalism is not just a conservative issue. Progressives have their own narratives. Amy Chua decries American progressives' shift away from messages that appeal to shared values and toward themes that dwell on ever-narrowing group identities. Could an LGBT subgroup be driven so far as to become LGBTTTQQIAAP?

The 2016 Election has been analyzed and succinctly summarized visually by David Rutman and his four quadrant graph⁴. Figure 2 shows a two-by-two matrix, with a horizontal liberal-to-conservative economic issues measure, and vertical liberal-to-conservative social issues measure, which serves to describe 2016 U.S. voters in four very different tribal commonalities.

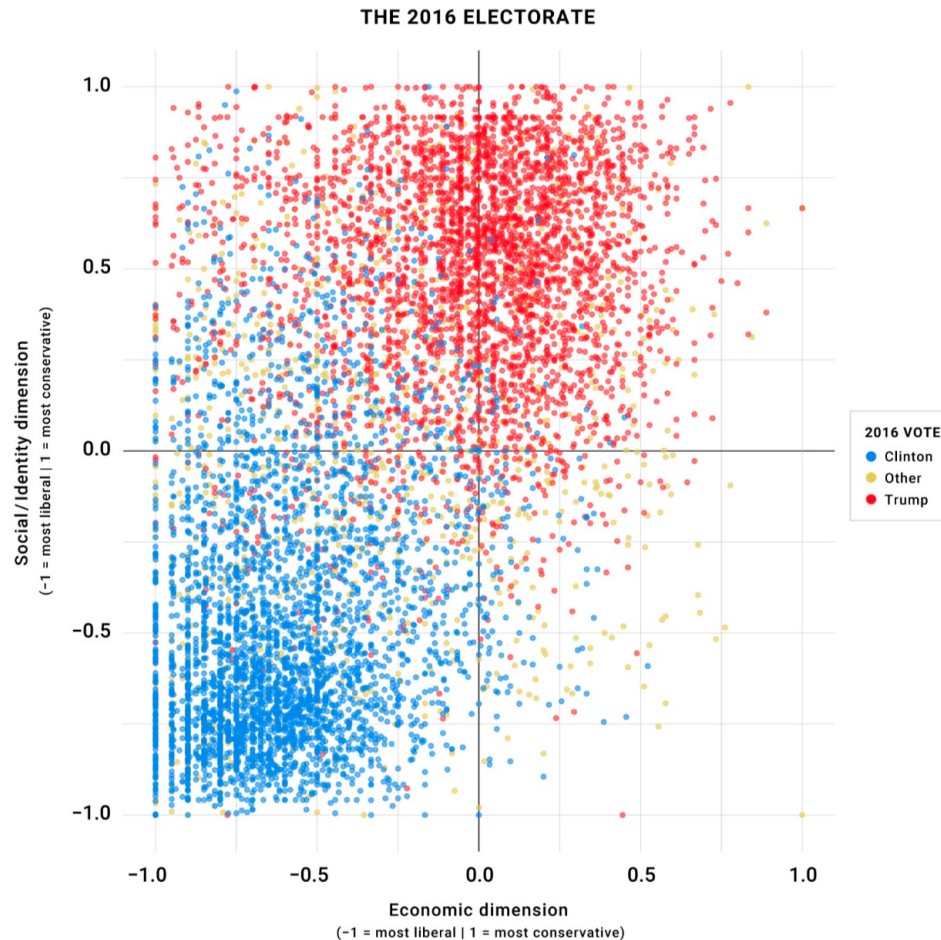


Figure 2, 2016 Election Analysis by Rutman

America's Political Tribes

1. "Rights and Safety net for all." **The lower left quadrant.** The liberal social and economic agenda of classic Democratic leadership. Their messages fell on deaf ears to the Trump base.
2. "Rule of law. Free Markets." **The upper right quadrant** of traditional Republicans, who were surprised in the 2016 Republican Primary. They will never support Democratic quadrant 1 thinking, but some are also Never-Trump supporters, missing the point of Group 3.
3. "Stop immigration. Protect my job." **The upper left quadrant** of Trump's Base, people who are conservative on social issues like guns and immigration, but who feel hammered by the global economy and are quite open to tariffs, protectionism, blowing up trade deals--anything that protects their jobs and income. This upper left quadrant has the most overlap between the two parties. Many Bernie Sanders supporters are in this same quadrant, suspicious of the global economy.

4. “Do your own thing.” The **lower right quadrant** are socially liberal, economically conservative libertarians. Rutman’s data show this is a very small Tribe in America, mostly ignored by the two political parties. -.

Political Tribes fit Facebook’s Business Model

With over two-thirds of U.S. citizens on Facebook and more than two billion users worldwide, it would be easy to think of Facebook as the world’s biggest digital melting pot. In fact, it’s no melting pot at all.

Facebook discovered that the byproducts of the socializing platform enabled a much more efficient platform for advertising, as seen in Figure 3.

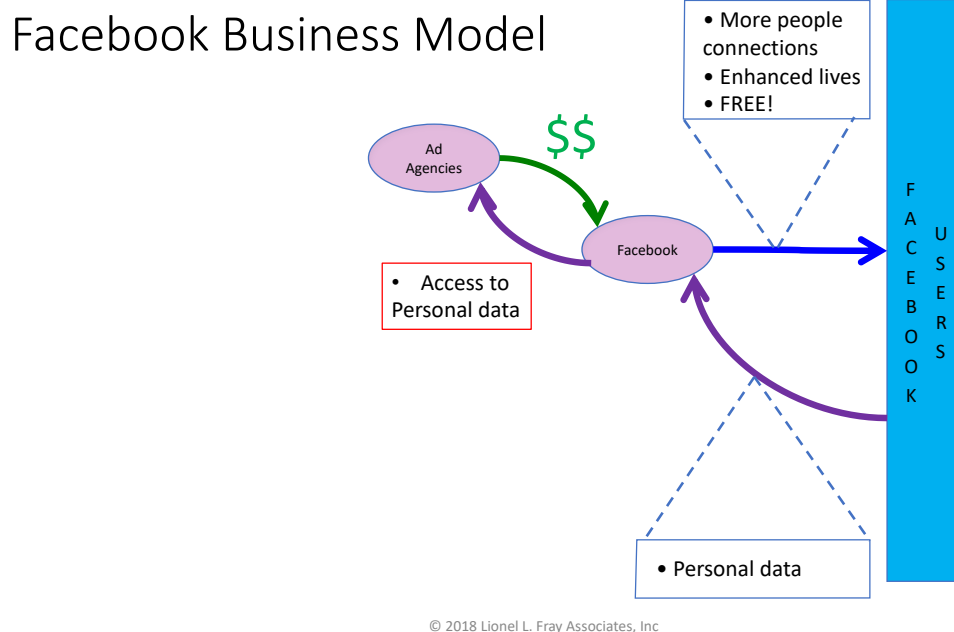


Figure 3, ValueMap of Facebook Business Model

This was made possible by the extensive data that Facebook had captured about its users, which allowed advertisers to micro-target the recipients who could then be presented with highly tailored advertisements. Even with its huge worldwide complex of users, its data and algorithms permit microtargeting to as few as 20 recipients. The result has been a huge shift of advertising dollars from conventional media such as TV, radio, and print to social media—now more than 50%—of which Facebook is the second biggest player, behind Google. Product and service marketers found that advertising on social media produces more sales per dollar expended. This pouring of money into Facebook was soon recognized by the stock market. Its market value has climbed to more than \$500 billion in just a few years.

To drive advertising revenue, Facebook's algorithms connects people with like-minded friends, concentrates their news feeds, and tailors their advertising. It intentionally creates highly segregated communities, a digital version, for example, of Los Angeles' ethnic neighborhoods. Its implied message: join your Facebook Political Tribe, with people who look, talk, and think like you do.

An early Facebook investor, venture capitalist Roger McNamee said, "In its heyday, television brought the country together, giving viewers a shared set of facts and experiences. Facebook does just the opposite, enabling every user to have a unique set of facts, driving the country apart for profit."

Political advertisers exploit Facebook's Tribes

Facebook has inverted the historical correlation of behavior and political affiliation. In the age of TV and print media, by knowing a group's purchasing habits and social actions, advertisers could predict its political affiliation. Now on Facebook, observing your political activity tells advertisers what car you will drive, where you will live, what causes you will support, and other predictive behaviors. Facebook records your online politics, feeds this information to commercial advertisers, who then target you with messages with a high degree of success.

And now political advertisers have come into the picture in strength. They had found that negative political ads are more effective than positive ones in other media. They have now found that negative ads and messages are even more effective on Facebook and other social media. So, negative ads have grown steadily from 15% of political ads in 2000 to 60% in 2016.⁶

Media companies exploit Facebook's Tribes

Fox News, Breitbart, Politico, Huffington Post and other political news organizations have leveraged Facebook to build viewership and ratings. Soundbites, slogans, key messages, cartoons, attack messages, and all the modern techniques of purposely biased coverage of political events work exceptionally well on Facebook Newsfeeds as well as ads. Research shows that when consumers agree with the position a media brand takes on political issues, they are overwhelmingly likely to show brand loyalty, purchase more from the brand, and recommend the brand to friends and family.⁷ The Facebook platform multiplies this effect. Another researcher reports that people are 16 times more likely to read a post from a friend than from a stranger on Facebook.⁸ The rapid viral forwarding of resonating messages spreads that Tribe's political talking points quickly and efficiently through Facebook, whether fair or not, fake or real.

The Facebook Vice Cycle

The most significant problem that has evolved with the explosive growth of Facebook we call the Facebook Vice Cycle—a fast positive feedback loop which has disastrous consequences. It is a vice in the sense of being the opposite of virtue—Facebook’s original non-political intention.

See Figure 4.

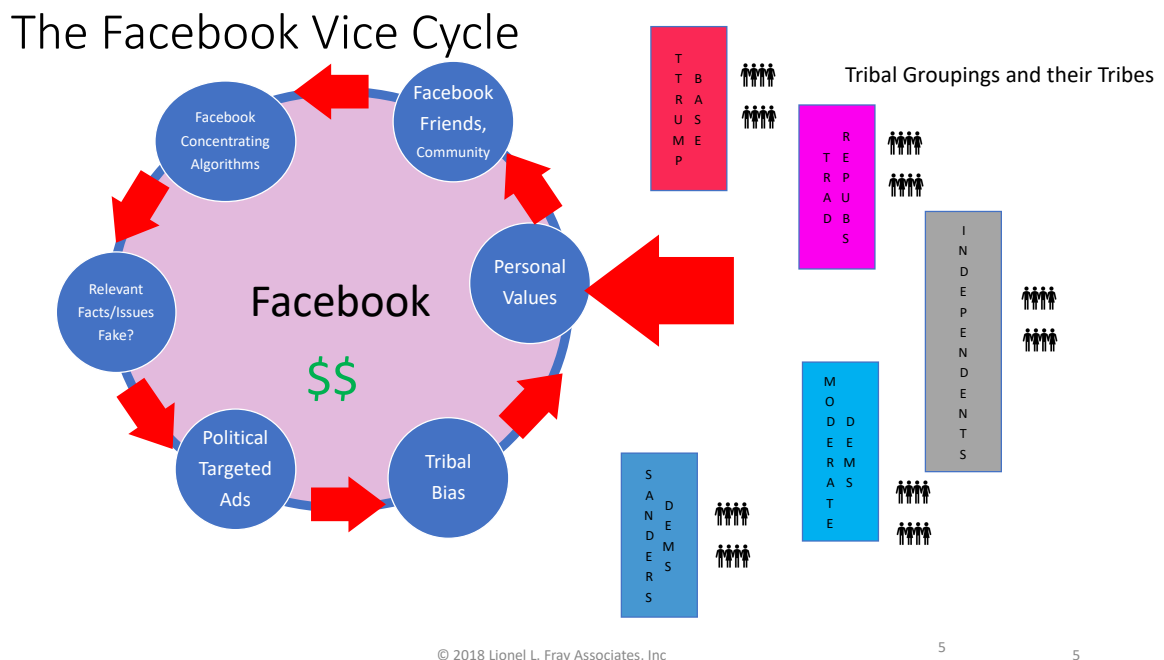


Figure 4, The Facebook Vice Cycle

Here’s how it works.

Facebook users are manipulated, without their knowledge or approval, to disclose their personal values. They friends with people who share most of these values, which expands the social scope. Without the further knowledge or approval of users, Facebook collects keystroke-by-keystroke data on the users, their likes, how much time they spend on articles or ads and myriad other personal behaviors. Facebook algorithms then identify the online behaviors, including political attitudes, and proceed to concentrate and combine user political attitudes with a set of common behaviors and values. These algorithms then select, again without user knowledge or approval, the news, stories, ad, and other ‘feeds’ on the user’s home page. This attracts sets of relevant facts and issues, some of which may be unsubstantiated or totally fake. Political advertisers turn them into political ads, often negative, and target them at the group. This reinforces the group’s particular values and prejudices, and the group speaks and begins to act as a Political Tribe. And then, of course, the process repeats, again and again,..... The speed

of the network and Facebook platform makes the cycle fast. There are many rotations within a month, a week, or sometimes even virally, in a few hours. Unfortunately for society, the fuel that propels this cycle is money. The faster the Facebook Vice Cycle rotates, the more profits are generated for Facebook. This eliminates its incentive to slow or attempt to reform the Vice Cycle.

Thus the simple positive values that Facebook promotes as its Social model (Figure 1)—free expanded social networking—also has political effects. While some of these may be positive in the sense that they can help certain groups become more effective politically, it also disguises the large *negative values* of its Business-Political Model (Figure 5). Facebook does not publicize this model, allowing the Facebook Vice Cycle to flourish.

Facebook Business-Political Model

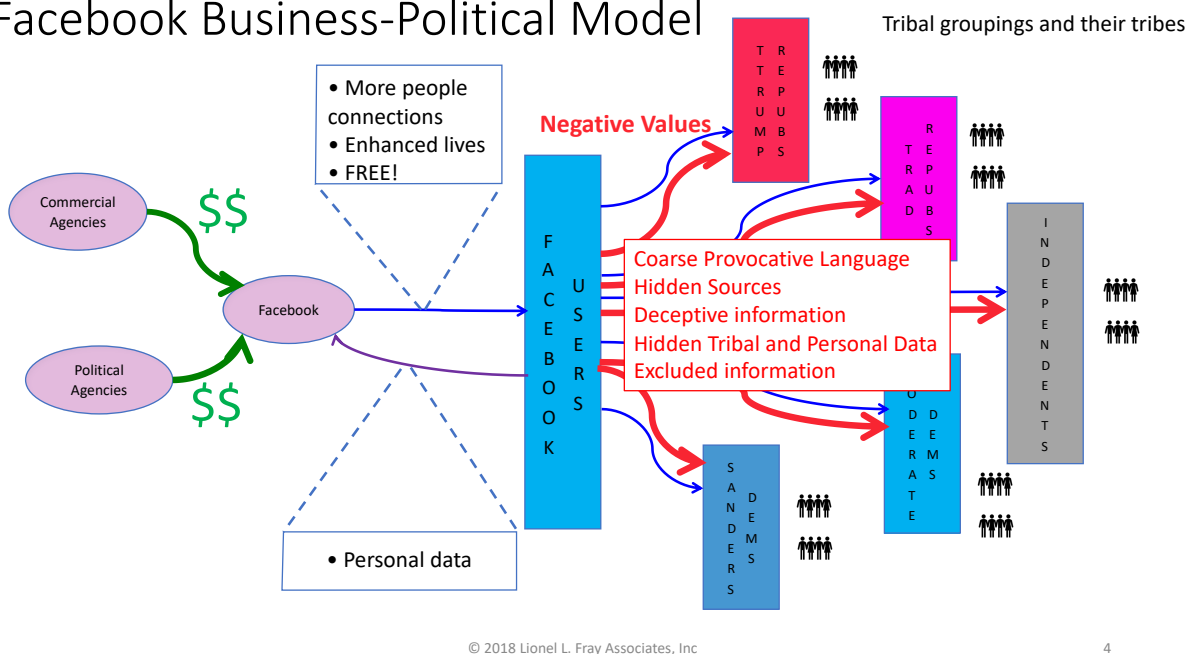


Figure 5, ValueMap of Facebook Business-Political Model

These negative values expand with the speed of the Facebook Vice Cycle.

- **Truth is devalued.** Fake IDs and Fake information easily become players in their targeted political tribe. With little or no policing by Facebook (except after-the-fact and only in egregious situations), and no source-checking by users, stories become Tribal rallying cries, factual or not.
- **Speed is more important than accuracy.** Facebook users who already follow, like, share, and promote their favorite political media will promote their soundbites, pictures, and stories quickly and widely. Juicy material may go viral within their political community without much critical review or thinking.

- **Civility has declined.** Negative political advertising, proven to work on other media platforms, works even better on Facebook, since it can reach its targeted audiences quickly, less expensively and more efficiently than TV, radio, or print advertising. An inherent Media bias wants to tell their favorite Political Tribe what it wants to hear, and thereby purposely confuses news (i.e., facts) with opinions, selective information, and bombastic language. This boosts their ratings and revenues.
- **Americans are less informed.** Ironically when news is so readily available and free or almost free, Americans on Facebook are exposed to fewer and fewer sources. Facebook's algorithms purposely concentrated through its highly selected news feeds, advertising, and friended material back to each individual user, further isolating each person in their Political Tribe. This has generated rapidly growing revenues for Facebook, and stimulated their addiction to the process.
- **Manipulation is undisclosed.** Most users have no idea how much information Facebook collects about them with every click, such as likes, time spent on a particular article and dozens of other metrics. And they have no idea how deceptive the Facebook platform is, pretending to be an open platform, but in fact feeding the user a highly selected political propaganda based on the hidden collected dossier of information. If the FBI or NSA collected this same data, there would be a public outcry about invasion of privacy. But no present law or constitution stops Facebook from capturing and using this same information about its users.

Facebook's negative values (some shown in Figure 5) are now large and growing for its users. But Facebook's platform keeps those negative values largely hidden from its users. Like drinking a can of concentrated orange juice, the Facebook Vice Cycle works to concentrate only one flavor of political activity, as if a Facebook user cannot taste any flavor other than orange, or in this case, their identified Political Tribe.

The future of democracy

The Facebook Vice Cycle has important consequences for America's political processes, as well as the many other countries it serves. While it is not their sole cause, its contribution to them has been substantial. America's international leadership has diminished as the Facebook Vice Cycle flaws have appeared more prominent. More dictators have gained more power. Tribal values increasingly compete with fundamental American values and in some cases, supplant them. Government is devalued and its operating efficiencies are reduced. There is lower voter turnout. More people think: "Why bother?" And in America, the melting pot process has not only slowed, it may even have reversed.

Can the genie—the new technologies that include the internet, the social media software and their algorithms, AI, and cellphones— be put back in the bottle? No. We can't go back in time.

Our leaders must first recognize all the unintended consequences and their effects and make our citizens aware of them. Working with Facebook leaders, they could then consider and put into effect a number of actions that initiates the process of remediating the Facebook Vice Cycle, some more rapidly than others.

1. Enhance Facebook's response to hate speech, violence, criminal behavior, and other community violations. Facebook's current approach is to continuously update its Community Standards⁸, creating and modifying algorithms that try to check its billions of users. Facebook has recently expanded a staff of over 10,000 checkers to enforce the Community Standards rules.⁹ Samidh Chakrabarti who is product manager of Civic Engagement at Facebook, has been leading company-wide efforts to secure Facebook's platform for elections. When asked by NBC's Jolene Kent, "Do you sense that the efforts now that Facebook is deploying to fight disinformation and fake news are working?" His guarded answer was, "I think we're much more effective than we used to be, in this regard."¹⁰ It's a too-little-too-late approach, catching only a fraction of the problems, and more importantly occurs only after the violation has 'lived' on Facebook for days, weeks, or longer. More resources and effort than this is needed.

User posted content should be subject to a Community Standard check by Facebook Standards algorithms, *prior* to posting or advertising on Facebook. Questionable material could require external peer reviews, much as Wikipedia requires. Violators could be subject to various consequences, such as a public offenders list. This will no doubt be costly and reduce revenues, but it will slow the Vice Cycle. It is Facebook's responsibility to catch offensive material and actions *before* they are distributed, not play catchup with increasingly sophisticated bad actors.

2. Apply the "equal time" rule. In the days of broadcast media dominance of political coverage, regulators adopted this method. The equal-time rule specifies that U.S. [radio](#) and [television](#) broadcast stations must provide an equivalent opportunity to any opposing [political](#) candidates who request it. This means, for example, that if a station provides a given amount of time to a candidate in prime time, it must do the same for another candidate who requests it, at the same price if applicable. This rule was created because the FCC was concerned that broadcast stations could easily manipulate the outcome of elections by presenting just one point of view and exclude other candidates.¹¹ It's time for Facebook, which has evolved from a simple platform to a medium despite its protestations, to be subject to the same rule, so that its concentrated political feeds to users are balanced by other candidates and points of view. This would require transparency of its algorithms.

3. Require Facebook data transparency . Besides algorithms, Facebook should disclose to the public what data it collects about users, at least annually, and each user should be able to select or limit what kinds and amounts of data Facebook collects. Regulations should make clear that users have the right to own and control their data including to whom access may be given.

4. Sourcing. Facebook should be required to identify the original source of the content it transmits, so that viral material can be traced by the user back to its source and the user can exercise judgment as to its validity. Blockchain technology could be used to track material from source through distributors to users.

5. To effect such change and make it effective, Facebook would need to change its internal values and culture. “Move fast and break things”, its famous dictum, would need to be modified to recognize and take responsibility for the effects of breakage. The needed change should include promoting new goals and policies internally, large investments in software and AI that counters the ill-effects, and research that tracks the effects of their implementations. Facebook, Google, and others claim to have started down this path, but they have a long way to go. Can change of this magnitude be accomplished without changing leadership is an open question.

6. Anti-trust laws. Diluting market concentration could also help. Our existing anti-trust laws are designed to not permit a large concentration of business power in an industry by any one company, because concentration has been judged to be destructive to both our economy and democracy. In the past, industries such as telephone networks, rail transportation, and oil have been subjected to these laws, on the whole with good effect. The Facebook and Google “platforms” have reached similar levels of concentration and power that should be addressed. But thus far, only the EEC has taken such action.

7. Other Regulation. We should establish boundaries that limit the use made of the personal data that enable social media. The EEC, with its GDPR, has started down this path, but they contain many holes, exceptions, etc. that limit their effectiveness and in some cases, overly-constrain. Better ones must be found and applied. This is a call to action for our Congressional and Executive leaders.

8. Education. The recent increased focus on STEM subjects at all levels—kindergarten, grammar, high, and college—should not reduce or eliminate an adequate focus on civics, history, religions, and other human relations or liberal arts courses that imbue our basic values. We need to put them back in the curricula with strength. The most effective resistance to social media unintended consequences comes from individuals who can think for themselves. We need a strong, well-educated citizenry who understand and are steeped in our values.

9. Leadership. Finally, we must elect both corporate and political leaders that find many opportunities to promote, stress, adhere, and most importantly, live America’s basic values.

Facebook....or Fakebook?

A number of recent news stories suggest that there has been a growing recognition of the unintended consequences of Facebook's arrival on the world stage, and of some of the negative values that it has generated. They also suggest that to date, its attempts to deal with such matters as Russian or more recently Chinese and other foreign attempts at stirring the US political pot for their own benefit have been inadequate. And it appears that by making sizeable investments in political lobbyists and consultants (e.g. see NYT 11/14/18 Delay, Deny and Deflect: How Facebook's Leaders Fought Through Crisis) Facebook management is resisting change by trying to head off criticism, or the formulation of potential laws and regulations, or indeed, any significant change in the company's direction.

But the Facebook Vice Cycle keeps rotating. It benefits Facebook's bottom line, but continues to feed and drive the US and other democratic governments towards more political tribalism

.-. Only reforms such as those suggested above can recapture the positive values of Facebook and minimize its negatives. Facebook could play its part and help save democracies if its leadership established this as a goal.

Footnotes:

1. www.valuemap.com/value-map/
2. <https://money.cnn.com/2017/10/01/media/facebook-russia-ads-congress/index.html>
3. <https://www.recode.net/2018/7/18/17575156/mark-zuckerberg-interview-facebook-recode-kara-swisher>
4. <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2016-elections/political-divisions-in-2016-and-beyond>
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/technology/brian-acton-facebook-critic.html>
6. [http://www.attackads.org/#prettyPhoto\[iframes\]/0/](http://www.attackads.org/#prettyPhoto[iframes]/0/)
7. <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/data/championing-change-in-the-age-of-social-media/>
8. <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/>
9. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/xwk9zd/how-facebook-content-moderation-works?utm_campaign=pockethits&utm_medium=email&utm_source=pocket
10. <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/inside-facebook-s-arms-race-protect-users-ahead-midterm-elections-n906046>
11. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal-time_rule

Authors

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During an extended consulting engagement at Intel when Andy Grove was its CEO, Lionel conceived and introduced ValueMap and the ValueMap Process to the company. The method was inspired by Intel's strong value-based culture, further developed with several executives, and successfully applied to help find and evaluate business opportunities for the company. Since then, he has used the technique in his

own consulting practice with many clients for strategic planning and for launching new ventures in the increasingly complex digital environment.

Lionel has more than twenty years of experience as a business consultant, often with Fortune 500 and other technology-based companies. He also served as CEO of two high-tech ventures in the oil & gas industry, both of which were successfully exited by sales to larger companies. And he has been a founder of six companies, one of which went public. Lionel holds BS and MS degrees in electrical engineering from MIT and an MBA from the Harvard Business School.

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