Gatekeepers, Trolls, and Social Media’s Dark Corners

Social media has changed how Americans talk and who we are.

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In a 2015 post entitled “Right Wing Trolls Can Win,” a blogger using the pseudonym Meow Blitz claimed that “the left won by seizing control of media and academia.“ But “with the Internet, they lost control of the narrative.”

Andrew Marantz, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, agrees that the culture wars are now being fought from smartphones. In *Antisocial*, Marantz, who embedded himself for two years in the worlds of Silicon Valley gatekeepers and gate-crashing nihilists and white supremacists, examines the degree to which social media changed how Americans talk and who we are. His guided tour of the dark corners inhabited by online extremists is mesmerizing, savvy, and scary,
a must-read for anyone interested in how memes go viral and bring fringe ideas to the mainstream of American politics.

Antisocial provides definitions of terms commonly used on 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and other extremist-friendly sites. “Shit-posts,” we learn, are absurd or bigoted attempts at “so-bad-it’s good” humor. “Rage quit” aims to infuriate opponents so much they withdraw from debates. “Echos” are the auditory equivalents of adding three parentheses around a Jewish person’s name. “Doxing” is an act of retribution, in which the real name, address, and personal information of a blogger is revealed.

Marantz also supplies up-close-and-personal profiles of several angry, alienated young men and women who rose through the ranks of the cult of white supremacy – and one who got out. When Mike Enoch Peinovich, the founder of the blog The Right Stuff and the podcast The Daily Shoah, was “doxed,” Marantz reveals, his parents and his Jewish wife were devastated.

Most important, Marantz reads into the record ugly posts that continue to get traction. Following the Charlottesville march, for example, jokes about the gray Dodge with the license plate GVF 111 appeared on a subreddit page. The most upvoted post, with dozens of karma points, declared “What happened today with the dead antifa was ethical.” “Heather Heyer was a fat, disgusting Communist,” tweeted Jason Kessler, an organizer of the march. “Looks like it was payback time.”

Marantz concludes by enumerating the painful lessons that have been – or ought to be – learned from Internet connectivity. The founders of Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, he reminds us, were techno-libertarians who believed they were helping create a “democratic force for putting power in people’s hands,” and diminishing the capacity of traditional gatekeepers to control the not-at-all free market of ideas.

They have learned, however, that the “best stuff” does not necessarily spread, that “without safeguards, people will use tools to interfere in elections, spread misinformation, and incite violence.”

Social networks, Marantz explains, “are not ineluctable forces but experimental technologies built by human beings.” And he adds, more provocatively, that neutrality is not a social good – and, in any event, may not be possible. To treat questions like “Should Muslim Americans be treated as real Americans?” and “Should women be welcome in the workplace?” as legitimate topics of debate, he maintains, “is to be not neutral but complicit.”
“We don’t have natural defenses against fat, sugar, salt, alcohol, alkaloids – or media,” Alan Key, a renowned computer programmer, maintained twenty-five years ago. With a much greater sense of urgency, Andrew Marantz concludes that the First Amendment “raises dilemmas that are not easily resolved by glib, one-size-fits-all absolutism”: instead of “imagining we occupy a post-gatekeeper utopia, it might make more sense – in the short term, at least – to demand better and more thoughtful gatekeepers.”

And, I would add, begin the hard, hard work of empowering and constraining them so that we can bring this generation – and the next one– back from the brink.

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