

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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The Subtle Power of Facebook

This May, the founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, invited a group of conservative leaders to his Silicon Valley board room to discuss the perceived Facebook bias against conservative views and positions being displayed on the Facebook platform. He denied bias against conservative views. The alleged censorship focuses on a feature on Facebook's desktop version called "trending topics," which relies on special curators to help select the new items to highlight. As *The Economist* reports, "The social network's priority is to get people to spend as long as possible on Facebook, which means showing the most relevant content to each user. The more time people spend the more ads Facebook can sell. It has no interest in alienating conservative users." But leaving aside this controversy over the "trending topics" part of Facebook, I want to concentrate in this *Perspective* on the subtle but real power of this social network. A few items for consideration:

- Facebook is powerful and growing in its influence in almost every area as a social network. It has 1.6 billion monthly users, around 200 million of them Americans. *The Economist* reports that on average, Americans spend 30% of their mobile-Internet time on Facebook's platforms, which include Instagram and WhatsApp. Around 90% of American adults who use Facebook pass the equivalent of two workdays a month on the social network. Facebook has the power to significantly shape public opinion.
- Facebook can transform people's moods and political behavior. One 2004 study demonstrated that users' moods could be influenced by whether the posts they viewed on Facebook were joyful or depressing. A 2012 study in *Nature*, determined that around 340,000 people probably turned up to vote in the congressional elections of 2010 because of a message they saw on Facebook, and "were especially likely to do so if a friend shared the call-to-action."
- Facebook has refined algorithms to generate a personalized newsfeed based on what they know about each user, with the goal of keeping them interested for as long as possible.
- This year (2016) candidates in all elections (national, state and local) will probably spend more than \$1 billion on digital advertising, more than 50 times what was spent in 2008. Facebook and Google will capture most of that revenue. This election cycle will prove the real power of Facebook. *The Economist* illustrates: "In 2008 political posts on social media spread virally, and Facebook did not have the ability to sell highly targeted ads."

Today it does. Candidates can upload their voter lists and find people they are trying to reach on Facebook, or create groupings of people who are similar to those they want to reach—say, female independents in a swing state that care about education.” Ted Cruz’s campaign this year mastered that strategy effectively. Such advertising is far superior to TV advertising, where it is more difficult to target specific groups of people. Jim Messina, a leading Democratic strategist, argues that Facebook is “more than seven times more effective at converting undecided voters than direct mail.”

- As campaigns can target very specific people, Facebook users enjoy personalized feeds of information online. But both of these last two points raise a troubling question: “If the future of political advertising is more direct, highly targeted ads, people who are unlikely to vote may be ignored, because they are not deemed worth paying to reach.”

All of this raises additional concerns about the role social networks such as Facebook play in our Postmodern, autonomous culture. Consider these concerns:

- As more Americans spend time on social networks that feed them only news that confirms their worldview, it furthers the “ideological fragmentation America already suffers from.” Don Baer of the communications firm, Burson-Marsteller, argues that “we are able to reach more and more people in ways that appeal to each one of them individually, but less able to reach people as citizens of one country.”
- Facebook also drives the growing pressure in American Postmodern culture to conform. *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni quotes social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who observes that “one of the things we want to do is spend more time with people who think like us and less with people who are different. The Facebook effect isn’t trivial. But it’s metabolizing or amplifying a tendency that was already there.”
- Facebook users are not challenged but validated and reinforced: “By bookmarking given blogs and personalizing social-media feeds, we customize the news we consume and the political beliefs we’re exposed to as never before.” Bruni: “The proliferation of cable television networks and growth of the Internet promised to expand our world, not shrink them. Instead they’ve enhanced the speed and thoroughness with which we retreat into enclaves of the likeminded.”
- A penetrating result of the social network phenomenon is that Americans are less committed to institutions. Instead, American millennials particularly gravitate toward micro-communities, many of which were “formed online, and their sensibilities can be more peculiar and unforgiving.” As Haidt and others have observed, such micro-communities discourage dissent within a “cluster of friends by accelerating shaming.” There is now enforced political correctness. Haidt: “Facebook allows people to react to each other so quickly that they really are afraid to step out of line.”

- *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat also comments that “Facebook represents a new era of media consolidation, a return to centralized authority over how people get their news . . . But because so many people effectively live inside its architecture while online, there’s a power in a social network’s subtlety that no newspaper or news broadcast could ever match.” For this reason, it is rather important that the power of this social network be “checked, critiqued and watched.” Its ability to shape and control is significant and it will no doubt grow.

For those of us who name the name of Christ, social networks such as Facebook demand that we exercise the fruit of the Spirit called self-control. We are to be controlled by the Spirit, not Facebook. We must be critical thinkers and wise, discerning believers in how we use Facebook. It can be a helpful tool for communication and networking. But a wise, discerning Christian will not be controlled by Facebook. It is a mere tool that we must control in our lives. Finally, Paul's strong exhortation in Philippians 4:8 is instructive when it comes to Facebook:

“⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (ESV).

See *The Economist* (21 May 2016), pp. 23-24; and editorial essays in the *New York Times* of Sunday, 22 May 2016, by Frank Bruni and Ross Douthat.