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Facebook's Ideal User: Healthy Habits, Social Capital, and the Politics of Well-Being Online

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Abstract

Through an analysis of Facebook design blogs, funded social psychology and human–computer interaction (HCI) research, this article will demonstrate how Facebook “scripts” a discursive material configuration of ideal use. It will show how users are prompted toward habits of “healthy” active usership—commenting on posts, direct messaging, and liking, for instance, through the design of the News Feed’s user interface. This article will detail how Facebook users are technologically nudged to choose practices of active behavior on the News Feed for the sake of their own health. This socio-technical configuration brings together contingent evolutionary psychology and neoliberal theories of social capital to construct a model of eudaimonic well-being—normative descriptions of what it means to live well as a human in time. In this way, Facebook will be shown to conceptualize well-being as an outcome of user choice, raising pertinent links to modalities of neoliberal responsabilization as a result. The conclusion will argue that Facebook’s configuration of its ideal user ought to be situated within a historical lineage of governance through habit, and will critically assess the extent to which the discursive and material scripting of the News Feed, which seeks to channel user behavior along “healthy,” predictable, and profitable avenues of interaction, operates as a technology of power entwined with contemporary relations of digital capitalism.

Keywords

Facebook, habit, well-being

Introduction: “Good for People, Good for Society”

In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal that broke in early 2018 (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018), whereby the data of millions of Facebook users were sold to a private political consultancy firm without explicit informed consent, Mark Zuckerberg faced questions during two sessions in front the US Senate and Congress concerning its business practices and social values. During his Senate hearing, Zuckerberg was asked to comment on recent reports linking Facebook usage with mental health issues such as addiction and depression. Such issues are common themes of contemporary Western mass media coverage of Facebook (Busby, 2018; Carey, 2019; O’Neil, 2019), and are explored in psychological studies that associate increased Facebook usage with decreased subjective well-being (Kross et al., 2013), higher levels of depression (Feinstein et al., 2013), and increased envy in users (Appel et al., 2016). Moreover, Sherry Turkle (2011) argues that individuals who spend

extensive periods online can become isolated within their immediate communities, while Jean Twenge (2017) links the rising levels of anxiety in North American teenagers to increased social media usage and reliance on the smartphone. Adding to this, Facebook’s former vice-president of user growth Chamath Palihapitiya had recently criticized the “dopamine-driven feedback loops” of Facebook’s liking system in a speech at Stanford Business School (Wong, 2017), and early investor Roger McNamee (2017), in an online article for *USA Today*, had compared the habit-forming tendencies of Facebook to “gambling, nicotine, alcohol or heroin.” These criticisms revolve around the so-called “persuasive” (Fogg, 2003) designs of Facebook that attempt to keep users

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interacting with the platform, functionally to produce the profitable data-traces necessary to fulfill Facebook's current business model of data-driven targeted advertising (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017; Fuchs, 2015).

In response to this line of questioning regarding user well-being, Zuckerberg stated in his Senate hearing: "I view our [Facebook's] responsibility as not just building services that people like, but building services that are good for people and good for society as well" (Guardian Live, 2018); and that "it's not enough to just build tools. We need to make sure that [. . .] all of the members in our community are using these tools in a way that's going to be good and healthy" (Guardian Live, 2018). While it would, indeed, be rare for any leader of a large technology company to publicly deny their product's health benefits and ethical credentials, this article will instead take seriously the normative stakes of Zuckerberg's gesture toward "good and healthy" Facebook usership. It will explore upon what discursive grounds Facebook determines its products as "good for people and good for society," and scrutinize how the intention to "make sure" Facebook users follow such principles manifest in the material design of the platform itself.

To do so, this article will provide a comparative empirical analysis of statements made by Facebook's leaders, Facebook's online design blogs, and its psychological and human-computer interaction (HCI) research that pertain to the "healthy" usership of its services, establishing how ideal users of the platform are constructed through discourses of the self-interested networked individual (Coleman, 1988). Concurrently, this article will highlight the ways Facebook users are prompted to follow tenets of ideal active usership—commenting on posts, direct messaging, and liking, for instance, through the design of the News Feed's user interface. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how Facebook "scripts" (Akrich, 1992) ideal Facebook users through a discursive material configuration (Foucault, 2002; Hook, 2001; Stanfill, 2015), drawing attention to the ways that such a configuration specifically channels historicized neoliberal values and a related model of eudaimonic well-being—normative descriptions of what it means to *live well* as a human in time (Aristotle, 2004; Besser-Jones, 2016).

To survey the connected discursive and material construction of Facebook's ideal user, the opening section will present a methodology that draws upon elements of script analysis (Akrich, 1992; Fallan, 2008). Following this, I will locate Facebook's ideal user within the discourses of active and passive usage found at various points in Facebook's mediatised public relations (PR) strategy concerning user health and well-being. These binaries of activity correspond to "healthy" and "unhealthy" forms of usership, respectively, and will be shown to be formed through a peculiar blending of evolutionary psychology and theories of neoliberal social capital. After highlighting the precise discursive contingencies through which Facebook can recommend normative modes of healthy usership, I will explore how users are technologically "nudged" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) along

pathways of active behavior on the News Feed—ostensibly to ameliorate the health dangers of user passivity. This process will be characterized as a form of responsabilization related to neoliberal modalities of individualistic self-care (W. Brown, 2005), revealing an analytic tension between Facebook's paternalistic designs of healthy usership and issues surrounding user agency. The conclusion will go on to situate this tension within the historical lineage of governance through habit (Foucault, 1995, 2015) critically assessing the extent to which the socio-technical scripting of Facebook, which seeks to channel user behavior along predictable, and profitable, avenues of interaction, operates as an expression of contemporary digital capitalist power (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Lazzarato, 2014; Pace, 2018; Srnicek, 2017).

Socio-Technical Scripts

According to Madeline Akrich (1992), the various interested actors involved in the design and dissemination of technological products—its designers, manufactures, and marketers, for instance, work to "inscribe" (p. 208) technologies with a "script" (p. 208) of ideal usage. Akrich (1992) employs a cinematic simile to describe this notion:

like a film script, technical objects define a framework of action together with the actors and the space in which they are supposed to act. (p. 208)

Latour (1994) relatedly discusses this process as "inscription," whereby "programs of action" are incorporated into the design of, and discourse surrounding, particular technologies (pp. 31–39). These imagined usages respond to and relay preconceived ideas about an artifact's ideal purpose, who its users will be, and the imagined context of its application. "Script analysis," as investigations of this kind have been termed (Fallan, 2008), examine the prescriptions of use built into technological products through empirical studies of their technical functions, the way these functions are advertised to intended users in particular consumer markets, and how these prescriptions play out in their actual human usage in various environments. Moving beyond purely deterministic or constructivist accounts of technology (Reed, 2014), therefore, the concept of the socio-technical script can be used to examine the "obduracy of objects" (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003, p. 9), while also capturing the relational dynamics that co-produce both users and technological artifacts within the historical milieu of their inception and use. However, as this article only studies the scripting of Facebook's ideal user in its materially-configured health and well-being discourses, and does not investigate how actual users are responding to such scripting in different contexts of use, what follows does not claim to offer a full application of script analysis per se, but is rather inspired by its conceptual and empirical focus.

According to Akrich (1992), the designers of technologies incorporate a “vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object” (p. 208). These visions, for Akrich, prioritize the perceived needs of certain user groups while often misrepresenting or altogether neglecting others. Else Rommes (2002), for instance, suggests that technical scripts “attribute and delegate specific competencies, actions, and responsibilities to their envisioned users” (p. 15), arguing that that assumptions about users and use-context are “materialised” (p. 15) in technologies. These ideas build upon the work of Woolgar (1991), which shows how the creators, designers, and marketers of technical devices “attempt to define and delimit the user’s possible actions” (p. 61) in discourse and design. Rather than the user existing a priori to a technologies release, “by setting parameters for the user’s actions,” Woolgar (1991) suggests “the evolving machine effectively attempts to configure the user” (p. 61). This means for Woolgar (1991) that technologies relay “basic assumptions” (p. 60) about both its ideal purpose and how this purpose can fulfill the imagined needs of its ideal users.

This process of *configuration*, whereby certain human and nonhuman entities are positioned in relation to each other, attempts to ensure that certain actions over others become more prevalent than others in technological use-contexts. However, such fixing of human roles often relays partial and gendered biases (Oudshoorn et al., 2004), as Ellen Van Oost (2003) and Leslie Shade (2007) have shown in the demarcation of gender roles in electronic shavers and mobile phones, respectively. For example, Van Oost argues that the design of the Phillips Ladyshave and the Philshave, as sold in the United States from the mid-20th century, serve to reinforce gendered constructs of the technologically adverse, passive female user in contrast to the technically knowledgeable, active masculine user. This is evidenced, for Van Oost (2003), in the “masking” (p. 206) of the technology of the Ladyshave, whereby the device was perfumed to cover the smell of oil, had no visible screws, and was marketed as part of a beauty set colored in pink, while the Philshave, conversely, had accentuated technical features, being designed to be self-serviceable, modifiable, and coming in a gun metal and black colorway (Van Oost, 2003, pp. 202–208).

While this current investigation of Facebook’s ideal healthy user is not explicitly focused upon configurations of gender, Van Oost’s work is able to show how the design and promotional discourses of technological products generate technological scripts that communicate limited worldviews and curtailed models of usership. Pfaffenberger (1992) argues that artifacts are always “projected into a spatially defined, discursively regulated social context” (p. 291) by their creators, who seek to restrict and stabilize the many potential interpretations of its social role, value, and usage in the world. Relatedly, Nissenbaum (2011) writes that the producers of socio-technical products are necessarily engaged in the task of describing how their “technology links into and satisfies certain cultural or symbolic needs that

people have” (p. 1377). Designed configurations of ideal human users and technical objects, therefore, represent political circumscriptions of the world by establishing and expressing both *how* they ought to be used and *by whom*. However, by de-naturalizing the assumptions built into technological products through empirically grounded research, this article contends that the analytic of the script can help facilitate a clearer view of the normative stakes of usership implicit within everyday socio-technical relations.

An analysis of Facebook’s public statements concerning good usership of the platform, it follows, can contribute to a script analysis of Facebook self-positioning as a service supposedly able to fulfill the well-being needs of its users worldwide. I will begin with a quote from Mark Zuckerberg’s hearing in front of the US senate in April 2018, which qualifies his statements concerning “healthy” usership of the platform introduced above:

We study a lot of effects of well-being of our tools [. . .] What we find in general is that you’re using social media in order to build relationships, right? So, if you’re sharing content with friends, you’re interacting, then that is associated with all of the long-term measures of well-being that you’d intuitively think of: long-term health, long-term happiness, long-term feeling connected, feeling less lonely. But if you’re using the internet and social media primarily to just passively consume content, and you’re not engaging with other people, then it doesn’t have those positive effects and it could be negative. (Mark Zuckerberg, quoted from a video recording of the hearing found on the Guardian Live YouTube channel, April 10, 2018)

Here, Zuckerberg references Facebook’s “study” of well-being to validate his assumptions about *why* Facebook users spend time on the platform. Specifically, actively involving oneself in communication with friends, while avoiding passive consumption of content, is presented by Zuckerberg as a way for users to “build relationships” with others in their social network.

The referencing of its own well-being research is a key feature of Facebook’s public engagement with the mental health issues related to the use of its products. For instance, Chris Cox, then Head of Product at Facebook, in an interview with *Wired* magazine in 2018, suggested that:

People want to have conversations [on Facebook]. They don’t want to be passively consuming content. This is connected with the research on well-being, which says that if you go somewhere and you just sit there and watch, and you don’t talk to anybody, it can be sad. If you go to the same place and you have five or six conversations that are good around what’s going on in the world, what you care about, you feel better. (Cox, quoted in Thompson, 2018)

Here, once again, Cox uses “research” to validate claims about what users “want” from Facebook, and then correlates the fulfillment of these desires with a (yet) undefined notion

of well-being. Likewise, in a speech at Morgan Stanley in 2018, Sheryl Sandberg, then COO of Facebook, claimed that “not all interactions in social media are equally good for people in terms of their psychological well-being” (Spangler, 2018), thereby echoing the hierarchy of activity espoused by Zuckerberg and Cox above.

The discursive opposition of active and passive usage can therefore be identified as a pattern in the public statements made about well-being by Facebook’s leaders in early 2018. Moreover, *choosing* to adopt either of these two modes of activity is implicitly presented as better or worse user decision, respectively, with this binary being presented in terms of health. However, as the philosopher of well-being Phillipa Foot (2001) argues:

to determine what is goodness and defect of character, disposition, and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other words, what kind of living thing a human being is. (p. 51)

Thus, the claims of “healthy” modes of usership expressed by Facebook’s representatives are normative in the sense that they establish behaviors that can be said to benefit the human subject on Facebook, while determining other forms of activity as deleterious. As I will show below, Facebook constructs this model of health in direct relation to findings from their research into social psychology and HCI. It is upon these quasi-psychological foundations (Rose, 1998) that Facebook feels authorized to construct, and recommend, a particular version of human sociality within which its services can be understood as valuable, and indeed, necessary for its users’ well-being.

For the philosopher of biological science Georges Canguilhem (1991), writing in the early 20th century, however, the definition of healthy human states in Western discourses of medicine constitute “an attachment to some value,” as opposed to a “disposition which can be revealed and explained as a fact” (p. 57). Canguilhem (1991) suggests that “the concept of health is not one of an existence, but of a norm whose function and value is to be brought into contact with existence in order to stimulate modification” (p. 87). In this way, health is not a stable concept existing in abstraction from the historical milieu of its enunciation, but can actually be viewed as a point around which human individuals can adjust their behavior in relation to certain categories of ideal normality. For Facebook to be able to establish online activity that is “better” and “healthy” for humans, thus, a pre-existing model of normal human nature is necessary, and particular types of human existence need to be identified as valuable to the individual upon this basis.

This process of determining valuable human activity is characteristic of eudaimonic accounts of well-being—the attempt to establish what it means to live well as a human in time (Aristotle, 2004; Raibley, 2013). There are two main threads of the psychological and philosophical study of

well-being; hedonistic and eudaimonic accounts (Haybron, 2008; Kahneman et al., 1999). Whereas hedonistic theories focus on human well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance (Parfit, 1984), the eudaimonic approach links well-being with a notion of human flourishing (Kraut, 2007). Eudaimonic well-being can be understood in terms of procedural self-fulfillment, meaningful existence, and well-functioning, with the psychologists Ryan and Deci (2008) describing eudaimonic psychology as concentrating on “the content of one’s life, and the processes involved in living well” (p. 140). For the philosopher Lorraine Besser-Jones (2016), moreover, living-well is “flourishing *qua* human being” (p. 187). Eudaimonic well-being is therefore oriented toward the *recognition and fulfillment of innate and distinctly human capacities*.

To identify the distinct traits, needs, and qualities of the human subjects/users that act as the idealized target for Facebook’s eudaimonic construct of well-being, I will now turn to the stated research upon which Facebook erects the division between active (healthy) and passive (unhealthy) usership. Access to this research can be gained via a blog post found upon Facebook’s *Hard Questions* blog series. *Hard Questions*, as its very first post in June 2017 states, was intended to make Facebook “more open and accountable” (Schrage, 2017) by offering an insight into how Facebook publicly conceptualizes and presents its action on various socio-political issues involving its services, addressing topics such as terrorist activity on Facebook, false news, data privacy, democracy, and user well-being (Schrage, 2017). Accredited to David Ginsberg, then director of research at Facebook, and Moira Burke, a social psychologist at Facebook, the blog post concerning user well-being is titled “Is spending time on social media bad for us?” (Ginsberg & Burke, 2017). Here, Ginsberg and Burke present Facebook’s well-being research, which suggests it is *how* people choose to use social media that determines the extent to which it is a positive or negative force for their health.

The Ideal Social User

On this blog, foreshadowing the quotes from Facebook’s leaders offered above, Ginsberg and Burke (2017) write,

According to the research, it really comes down to *how* you use the technology. For example, on social media, you can passively scroll through posts, much like watching TV, or actively interact with friends—messaging and commenting on each other’s posts. Just like in person, interacting with people you care about can be beneficial, while simply watching others from the sidelines may make you feel worse.

The blog post contains hyperlinks to particular psychological studies to bolster these claims. These include, for instance, papers by Philippe Verduyn et al. (2015, 2017) that survey the links between different types of Facebook activity and user well-being, and Toma and Hancock’s (2013) research into Facebook

and self-affirmation. Such research examines the psychological impact of Facebook through the binary of active and passive usage. These studies are referenced by Burke and Kraut as they seem to show that measures of well-being can increase if Facebook users engage in certain active habits—private messaging, liking friends’ photos and commenting for instance, as opposed to passive habits such as scrolling down the News Feed without interacting with posts, or failing to message friends and family.

The first reference to Facebook’s own research on well-being on the *Hard Questions* blog is a paper co-authored by Moira Burke herself and Robert E. Kraut (2016). In this paper, Burke and Kraut suggest that Facebook exists as a tool that could benefit users’ well-being if used *correctly* to actively interact with others on the platform. Their argument, Burke and Kraut (2016) write, works “upon the assumption that people benefit from social interaction with others” (p. 266). This “assumption” is partly justified with a reference to Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) evolutionary concept of human belonging. Baumeister and Leary posit that humans have evolved to be reciprocally caring and social creatures to maintain evolutionary advantages in potentially threatening environments. The positive emotional ties that bind humans with others in familial groups, friendship circles, and romantic relationships are said to be distinct human characteristics that grant access to reproductive mates, mutual protection and resources such as shelter and food. Conversely, Baumeister and Leary (1995) claim that the “lack of [social] attachments is linked to a variety of ill effects on health, adjustment, and well-being” (p. 497), suggesting that human empathy and communication developed as evolutionary and physiological necessities of human survival.

In referencing the evolutionary psychology of Baumeister and Leary, Burke and Kraut stake out a particular presentation of the Facebook user as an inherently “social” animal—a being whose healthy internal psyche and physical vitality are linked to communicating and socializing with other like creatures. Solidifying this notion, Burke and Kraut (2016) write that

humans are a social species, with many survival advantages accruing from our connections to others. (p. 267)

As acting upon distinct human qualities to flourish *as a human* constitutes a core component of eudaimonic procedural accounts of well-being, if humans are social beings “by nature,” striving to act upon this innate sociality by adopting good Facebook habits of active, frequent, communication, can be presented by Facebook and its representatives as a contribution to living well as an ideal user on the platform. In this way, the forms of evolutionary sociality that have supposedly set the possibility of human vitality prior to the development of social media are said to be still operative in the current age of digital connectivity. Upon this basis, Facebook is presented as a tool to be utilized by human

agents for their own social evolutionary purposes—a neutral technology that facilitates pre-existing human tendencies to communicate, socialize, and connect with those around them. As the fulfillment of social connection is said to lead to the development of beneficial emotional bonds, required for the evolutionary development of humanity as a species, and the lack of sociality results in damaging health effects, the “need to belong” (Burke & Kraut, 2016, p. 266) is positioned as a natural human trait. As such, Burke and Kraut (2016) predict that “social interaction [on Facebook] should improve well-being by fulfilling these needs” (p. 266).

Reciprocating social ties on Facebook is said to sustain the access to the emotional support necessary for humans to fulfill their “species” social being. This is understood by Burke and Kraut (2016) in terms of “relationship maintenance” and “relational investment” (p. 266). The link to evolutionary theory is once again reiterated by Burke and Kraut with a reference to evolutionary psychologists Roberts and Dunbar (2010), whose work claims that regular and repeated interpersonal communications are necessary to maintain both primate and human social networks. Burke and Kraut (2016) refer to this relationship maintenance as an “investment” (p. 266) in time and energy. Relationships on Facebook are said to benefit users in accordance with the costs of time and energy invested into them. This argument is made through a reference to Ellison et al.’s (2014) research on social capital and social media, which suggests that high effort in relationship maintenance and communication with friends online correlates with high levels of social capital (the access to emotional and material resources that relationships in social networks can provide (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and user well-being. As such, the value of relationships in Burke and Kraut’s, and by extension Facebook’s, construction of social well-being is established through the prism of self-interest.

Elsewhere in its research, moreover, Facebook repeatedly characterizes relationships as investments in social capital. For instance, in Facebook’s earliest research into user well-being (Burke et al., 2010, 2011), investing time and energy into relationships is said to constitute healthy Facebook practice by ensuring that social ties remain intact over time. These social investments thereby increase the likelihood that social resources will be available to users if needed in the future. In this model, the rational motivation for ideal usership on Facebook is the expected return individuals would gain on their emotional investment in others. In Facebook’s early studies on social capital and well-being, thus, the former is positively correlated with the latter: higher levels of social capital in users predict higher levels of well-being. While the personal choice to invest in relationships and cultivate social capital amounts to living well on Facebook, once viewed in combination with Facebook’s evolutionary discourse of the social human subject, this choice is simultaneously presented as the fulfillment of a natural inclination to connect with others in a shared social

environment. Upon this basis, direct communications, sharing statuses, liking photos, commenting on posts—and all the other hallmarks of good, active usage, rather than being viewed as the result of a designed user-experience intended to gather data for the sake of capitalist profit (Beer, 2016; Hearn, 2010; Skeggs & Yuill, 2016; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), can instead be presented as the result of rational user choices fulfilling innate human social needs. However, the next section will show how Facebook's modeling of ideal usership originates from a very particular time and place, specifically working to encourage users to “believe that we can integrate all our values, unify our compartmentalized worlds, and measure our longings” (Espeland & Mitchell, 1998, p. 323) through the rubric of neoliberal self-interest.

Neoliberal Choice

Facebook's entwining of healthy usership and social capital positions the ideal Facebook user as a rational agent of self-interest, yet its specific political character can be further explicated by tracing the origins of its theoretical construction. In Facebook's earliest studies of well-being, James S. Coleman (1988) is the first reference used by Facebook's researchers to conceptualize their version of social capital (Burke et al., 2010). As a result, and as I will demonstrate below, Facebook's vision of the ideal user can be said to assume a neoliberal form. Developing the notion of human capital espoused by Gary Becker (1964) and Theodore Schultz (1961) in the 1960s, which takes the unique capacities of the human actor as differentials of value in the labor market, Coleman's theory of social capital from the late 1980s North America attempts to extend the remit of economic rationality to the totality of social relations. Coleman suggests that social capital is an economically functional concept, attributing value to the potentially productive relations that exist between persons. In this way, Coleman (1988) considers social capital in tandem with the concepts of financial, physical, and human capital, and the situation of value in money, factors of production, and personal skills, respectively (p. 118). This results in an economization of social relations. With his version of social capital, Coleman (1988) seeks to

import the economists' principle of rational action for use in the analysis of social systems proper, including but not limited to economic systems, and to do so without discarding social organization in the process. The concept of social capital is a tool to aid in this. (p. 97)

For Coleman, and within Facebook's research explicated so far, social capital is conceptualized as a resource available to each social actor in any given social environment to further their own self-interested goals, and can be identified as the primary relation that connects individuals together within social networks. Competitive self-interest, thus, forms the

theoretical basis upon which social organizations, like Facebook's social network, can be studied.

The sociologists Ferragina and Arrigoni (2017) would argue that the incorporation of Coleman's theories of social capital into Facebook's social psychology would represent an

example of how the analytical categories of neoliberalism and the language of the stock market have decisively permeated social and political discourse over the last few decades. The reduction of social relations to something similar to financial capital implicitly means to assume that community involvement and social participation are forms of economic activity. (p. 358)

Facebook's specific utilization of social capital to explicate the value of user relationships, therefore, could be viewed as a reductionist extension of economic rationality to formerly non-economic social domains and institutions. Foucault's (2010) analysis of North American neoliberalism presented in his 1978–1979 lectures at the Collège de France is a pertinent reference point to understand this notion further. In these lectures, Foucault (2010) describes the rationality of neoliberalism as a generalized attempt to “use the market economy and the typical analyses of the market economy to decipher non-market relationships and phenomena which are not strictly and specifically economic” (p. 240). Elsewhere, Foucault (1983) describes neoliberalism as the “government of individualization” (p. 212); a form government that tasks itself with the production of subjects capable of being governed by such economic regulatory principles of competition and enterprise. For Graham Burchell (1996), therefore, as opposed to a governmental regime of governing less, neoliberalism is best understood as the construction of the “institutional and cultural conditions that will enable an artificial competitive game of entrepreneurial conduct to be played to best effect” (p. 27).

Thus, when Foucault (2010) describes neoliberalism as the “the generalization of the economic form of the market [. . .] throughout the social body” (p. 243), he is referring to those processes that extend the precepts of economic rationality to investigate forms of human organization, conduct, and relationships not previously understood as economic domains. In appropriating scales of neoliberal social capital as measures of well-being, Facebook relays a historicized conceptualization of the human subject entangled with economic discourses of self-interest and competitive choice. In Facebook's discourse of the ideal user, consequently, the individual is enjoined to view their relationships as resources to be weighed up to further their self-interested goals and are tasked with choosing habits of active usership to cultivate their social capital for the sake of their own well-being. Wendy Brown (2005) suggests such configurations of wellness in neoliberal discourses construct, and treat, individuals as:

rational, calculating creatures whose moral authority is measured by their capacity for “self-care”—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. (p. 42)

The emphasis on self-sufficiency and the autonomy of personal decision-making means, for W. Brown (2005), that the individual in neoliberal societies “bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action [are]” (p. 42).

Thus, regardless of the various social contingencies that structure the possibilities of personal well-being in various spheres of life—in the workplace, at home, or in education, for instance, including, but not exclusive to, configurations of class, ethnicity, gender, or physical capacity (B. J. Brown & Baker, 2013), the ideal users of Facebook, instead, exist in a vacuum whereby their choice of activity on the platform, and their choice of activity alone, determines their social capital and well-being online. However, the atomized agents inherent within neoliberal social capital theories such as Facebook’s greatly contrast with other conceptualizations of social capital as espoused, for instance, by Bourdieu (1986). Bourdieu (1986) suggests that the access to resources enjoyed by individuals within social networks are directly correlated with class and socio-economic standing, indicating that there are variegated structural forces in play that delimit any benefits individuals can glean from their social circles. In Facebook’s discourse of social well-being, however, autonomous users utilizing Facebook’s tools *in the right way* are solely responsible for their health on the platform. Consequently, such responsabilized processes of personal choice avoid any discussions regarding the structural inequalities that may impact an individual’s well-being as they navigate contemporary neoliberal forms of life (Cole & Ferrarese, 2018; Dardot & Laval, 2013).

The work of social policy scholar John Clarke (2005) would indicate that the responsabilization of users on Facebook in terms of well-being is resonant with neoliberal public health policies of individualization. Clark (2005) writes that:

responsible citizens [it is claimed] make reasonable choices—and therefore “bad choices” result from the wilfulness of irresponsible people, rather than the structural distribution of resources, capacities and opportunities. (p. 451)

This focus on personal choice has also been identified as key element of the discourse surrounding technology and well-being by Natasha Dow Schüll (2016). In her exploration of the biopolitics of wearable tracking technologies, such as Fitbit and Jawbone, Schüll (2016) argues that the selves produced by networked technologies are idealized as “choosing subjects” (p. 8) capable of utilizing the array of complex technologies available on the market to improve their physical and mental health. “More precisely,” Schüll (2016) writes, these idealized subjects are “are construed as consumers whose well-being depends on and derives from the market choices they make” (p. 8).

In presenting well-being online as an outcome of user choice, Facebook’s account of well-being side-steps the discussion surrounding its potentially addictive, anxiety-inducing,

“persuasive” (Fogg, 2003) design. Instead, Facebook’s PR strategy surrounding these issues operates on the level of individual habit, suggesting that well-being arises from correct personal social networking choices alone. While the responsabilized subject of well-being has been studied in relation to funding cuts to public services in the United Kingdom (B. J. Brown & Baker, 2013; Goode et al., 2004), as a mode of neoliberal biopolitics (Wright, 2013), or as a modality of consumerist and marketized discourses of health care (Anderson et al., 2016), Facebook’s own individualized concept of well-being limits the discussion of what it means to live well in the present age to the narrow parameters of a particular form of online self-interested connection. The well-being of users in Facebook’s discourse of active and passive usage, therefore, is firmly presented as the responsibility of users themselves.

So far, I have shown how Facebook’s recommendations of “healthy” usership are made through the blending of evolutionary and neoliberal discourses, arguing that Facebook’s model of ideal usership seeks to present the engineered sociality observable on the platform as the outcome of the rational user choosing to act in alignment with their “natural” eudaimonic needs. I have argued that Facebook’s ideal user relays conceptualizations of the neoliberal social subject, and, as such always exists in a necessary process of construction. Thus, I have presented Facebook’s concurrent appeal to evolutionary human need as a strategic attempt to naturalize what is an inherently artificial vision of human sociality. The following section will explore how the discourse of the healthy user manifests in the designed nudges (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) of Facebook’s News Feed user interface. In doing so, the supposed autonomy of Facebook’s ideal user to choose to live well on the platform will be thrown into question.

News Feed Nudges

Similarly to B. J. Fogg’s (2003) belief that “persuasive” technological design can “create interactive experiences that motivate and persuade people” (p. 5) toward certain ends, Thaler and Sunstein’s (2008) vision of the psychological nudge suggests that subtle environmental design decisions can adjust human behavior in particular directions. For instance, social psychological research has purportedly shown the ways that setting a default option in an administration form increases the likelihood of an individual choosing that option as their final decision (Pichert & Katsikopoulos, 2008); others have demonstrated that drawing attention to specific products on supermarket shelves can influence consumer purchasing patterns (Kroese et al., 2016); while Thaler and Sunstein (2008) themselves suggest that minute visual cues can unconsciously direct behavior in different settings—as demonstrated by the famous example of the engraving of a housefly on urinals in Schiphol airport that successfully reduced user “spillage” by 80% (p. 4). Beyond constructing consumer choices and toilet hygiene, the UK

government has a dedicated “Nudge unit,” officially called the Behavioral Insights Team, that is tasked with researching and proposing governmental policies that promote healthy behaviors (Halpern, 2015), while Sunstein himself was an advisor to the Obama administration and design consultant to the Affordable Care Act in the United States in 2010 (Schüll, 2016). Nudge, then, refers to the conscious arrangement of environments so as to affect certain behavioral outcomes within them. These types of environments have been termed “choice architectures” by Thaler and Sunstein (2008).

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) describe the process of nudging as “libertarian paternalism”—the attempt to design social environments that “move people in directions that will make their lives better” (p. 6) while still maintaining an impression of free choice. By drawing explicitly upon the work of Milton Friedman, who can be viewed as one of the intellectual pillars of neoliberal economic doctrine (Harvey, 2007; Stedman Jones, 2012), Thaler and Sunstein (2008) argue that the libertarian aspect of nudge theory is found in the core notion that people “should be free to do what they like” (p. 6). In their work, Thaler and Sunstein directly quote Friedman’s refrain that individual freedom is constituted in being “free to choose” (Friedman & Friedman, 1980) the direction, character and quality of one’s life. The paternalistic aspect of nudge theory, on the other hand, establishes the idea that it is “legitimate” to

try and influence people’s behaviour in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better. In other words, we argue for self-conscious efforts, by institutions in the private sector and also by government, to steer people’s choices in directions that will improve their lives. (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, p. 5)

As such, nudging is ethically grounded upon the notion that the direction of human choice is valid if such an effort is consciously intended for the good of the individuals involved. Using Thaler and Sunstein’s nudge theory as a lens to understand the News Feed as a “choice architecture,” this section will identify a strongly libertarian paternalistic aspect behind the News Feed’s technical features that prompt increased user interactions over user passivity. Specifically, I will show how the nudging of Facebook users along pathways of active usership on the News Feed is always legitimated upon the basis that it will improve their health and well-being, namely by allowing them to fulfill their “natural” social essence and accrue social capital through their online relationships. Mark Zuckerberg’s (Guardian Live, 2018) stated intention to build services that are “good for people and good for society,” therefore, will be shown to manifest in the designing of material choice architectures that nudge users as if increased interactions were, indeed, “good” for them in some way. This will be shown to discursively align the intensification of user data-traces (requisite for Facebook’s continued economic expansion) with the well-being interests of Facebook users themselves and will subsequently be presented as an expression of power (Foucault, 1995, 2015)

In a blog post from January 2018 titled “Bringing people closer together,” Adam Mosseri (2018), then head of News Feed, specifically states that the News Feed is designed to foster forms of active user engagement. Ranking—the current name of the News Feed algorithm, Mosseri (2018) suggests, is built to

prioritize posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people. To do this, we will predict which posts you might want to interact with your friends about, and show these posts higher in feed. These are posts that inspire back-and-forth discussion in the comments and posts that you might want to share and react to.

Connecting users to content they are most likely to interact with, therefore, considered as part of the discourse of the ideal user outlined so far, can legitimately be presented by Facebook as a way to help users cultivate their bonds of social capital on the News Feed. As taking the time to comment on a friend’s post, for instance, supposedly increases levels of social capital between users by representing an investment of individual time and energy, increasing the chances of these types of interactions could predict higher feelings of social belonging and well-being in users (Burke & Kraut, 2016). More evidence that the News Feed is designed to foster active communications can be found in a number of blog posts on “News Feed FYT”—the design blog where Facebook announces developments to the News Feed. For instance, a post by Shali Nguyen and Ryan Freitas (2017), designers at Facebook, outline changes made to the comments feature on posts that are intended to prompt user interactions and encourage “better conversations” beneath posts. Here, Nguyen and Freitas (2017) detail the ways they have made improvements to the “readability” of posts on the News Feed toward this end. For example, these improvements include increased color contrasts on posts, making typography easier to distinguish; updated larger, Like, Comment, and Share icons on posts; and more visible profile picture icons to show more clearly who is involved in the discussions taking place in the comments section (Nguyen & Freitas, 2017). Furthermore, each user’s ability to directly reply to comments in a post has been enhanced and made more accessible. These modifications, it is said by Nguyen and Freitas (2017), make the News Feed easier to “navigate” and aim to “help people have more lively and expressive conversations on Facebook.” This attempt to encourage “lively” conversations, read alongside Mosseri’s intentions to “spark” engagement on the News Feed, form part of the discursive pattern that establishes the access to one-to-one conversation as a core component of healthy Facebook usership.

Another example that demonstrates how certain values of ideal usership manifest in the design of the News Feed can be found in a blog post from April 2018 titled “Designing new ways to give context to news stories” (Smith et al., 2018). This post, attributed to Jeff Smith, Alex Leavitt, and Grace Jackson, designers and UX specialists at Facebook, documents the

development of a feature that gives background information about the publisher and author of the various news articles that appear on the News Feed. This feature was envisaged to, as the post states, give “people the tools to make informed decisions about which stories to read, trust, and share” (Smith et al., 2018). News articles on Facebook are now accompanied by an information button that animates when the user scrolls past it on the News Feed. If the user clicks on this button, information appears that details the publisher of the news article, related articles, and from what locations in the world the article has been shared.

Explaining why the information button was animated, the designers state how this feature was intended to

draw a person’s attention and dynamically inform people that both 1) the feature existed, and 2) that there was relevant information that they should care about within the pop-up. (Smith et al., 2018)

Here, we can see the way that posts that appear on the News Feed invite interaction with them according to the publicly stated intentions of their designers. The decision to animate the information button can be viewed as an explicit attempt to prompt users to engage with the credibility of news sources as part of their habitual Facebook activity. That this type of activity is something that users “should care about,” moreover, mobilizes a eudaimonic vision of what constitutes living well as a Facebook user. Specifically, caring about the provenance of news sources relays particular assumptions about the participatory subject utilizing the News Feed in its imagined capacity as a digital public sphere (Bode, 2016; J. E. Carlisle & Patton, 2013). Recalling the notion that technologies materially impart particular assumptions about the world in their design, establishing that such assumed values do, indeed, exist within Facebook’s News Feed, while perhaps not necessarily contestable as such, still indicates that it’s design can in no way be considered as neutral as a result (Light & McGrath, 2010).

The design decision to make the news information feature on posts as dynamic, and thus engaging, as possible, serves to evidence the ways that Facebook incorporates normative values into the News Feed’s user interface according to a model of ideal use. The algorithmic make-up of Ranking, furthermore, that orders posts upon the basis of likely interaction, and the accessible design of communication features, such as the like, comment, and share buttons, can also be considered as design features that prompt user engagement with the News Feed in alignment with the tenets of ideal usership I have been explicating in this article so far. Here, Mosseri’s stated desire to “spark conversations” on the News Feed is a paternalistic nudge in the sense that it presumes users would desire, and require, such interactions on the platform in their day-to-day lives. The development of such technical features toward this end, moreover, as Mark Zuckerberg (2017) states in a Facebook blog post, are intended to foster the emergence

of a “healthy society” of Facebook users worldwide. This once again projects a normalizing vision of user “health” in accordance with a set of pre-established values decided by Facebook and its team of researchers and designers. Therefore, in setting the ideal parameters of user choice in terms of health, without necessarily determining that these choices *must* be followed, the design of the News Feed can usefully be considered as a “choice architecture” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) of designed nudges—an arrangement of human choice in such a way that makes more likely certain outcomes over others.

Conclusion

Despite Facebook’s declaration that its services are “tools” to be utilized freely by users, the characterization of the News Feed as a choice architecture throws the supposed autonomy of Facebook users to manage their own well-being into question. For Carolyn Pedwell (2017), the connection between nudge theory and behavioral economics, as made explicit by Thaler and Sunstein’s engagement with Friedman’s neoliberal embellishment of free choice, should be situated

within much longer histories of governing through habit—histories which reveal the capacity for habit to be employed as an exclusionary technology of social and geo-political regulation. (p. 62)

By setting up certain “programs of action” (Latour, 1994) as “healthy” for users, Facebook erects a hierarchy of activity through which the ideal user can recognize and adapt their activity as appropriate for the platform. Facebook’s discursive and material scripting of self-interested ideal usership, therefore, can be said to form part of the “fabric of habits” (Foucault, 2015, p. 239) through which users are classified as humans of a certain type, and treated as such, in relation to others within digital social networks. Following Foucault (2015), as the instilling of human habit “is the instrument by which individuals are tied to the apparatuses of production” (p. 239), the recommendation and prompting of active (good) habits in contrast to passive (bad) habits ought to be understood as constituent elements of an economic process.

As I have reiterated throughout this article, nudging users to interact with posts, message friends and maintain active usership on the platform inculcate the user habits necessary to ensure Facebook’s continued profitability as a data platform (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017; Fuchs, 2015). User habits, thus, become both the target and means for Facebook to exist as a force within contemporary relations of digital capitalism (Chun, 2016). In this way, the News Feed can be usefully understood as “technology of power” (Hoy, 1986, p. 132)—a term David Couzen Hoy uses to describe the arrangement of social environments in such a way that makes some actions more “probable” (p. 133) than others within them. Here, habit

does not simply denote human routines of unconscious, automatic behaviors (Camic, 1986) oppressive to an ideally free human agent (Kant, 1966), but instead indicates the creative mechanism through which humans incorporate the demands of environments into their practices of social being. This relational concept of habit has philosophical antecedents in the work of William James, John Dewey, and Gilles Deleuze (Bennet, 2013; C. Carlisle, 2014; Crossley, 2013) and also finds a sociological expression in Bourdieu's (1992) notion of *habitus*.

Consonant with the issues surrounding choice architectures explored in this article, more specifically, this idea of habit as environmental incorporation indicates that certain "micro-physics" of power (Foucault, 1995, p. 25) are in tension on the News Feed. As Facebook users inhabit an environment expressly designed to foster personal bonds of active communication, their online activity is guided toward certain possibilities of conduct (Foucault, 1983, pp. 220–221) that require careful navigation. Here, following the thought of Foucault (1995), power is not something that one wields or possesses over another, but constitutes the relations of force that are "exercised" (p. 25) through various configurations of interested actors—institutional, collective, non-human, human, or otherwise, for strategic purposes. In this way, Facebook's discursive material configuration of healthy social networking habits function to serve Facebook's corporate interests by producing "active" (profitable) practices of usership on the platform. This situation is explicitly recognized by Adam Mosseri (2016) in a blog post that can be found on News Feed FYI. Designing the News Feed to increase user interactions, Mosseri (2016) states here, is justifiable "not only because we believe it's the right thing [for users], but also because it's good for our business." Rather than aligning with the somehow "innate" needs of users, which this article has shown to be constructed through the historicized (and problematic) concepts of neoliberal social capital and evolutionary primate group dynamics, the discursive configuration of what is "good" for users, materially arranged in the choice architecture of the News Feed, is, in fact, better viewed as an attempt by Facebook to proliferate active usership on the platform for its own economic gain.

This article has empirically analyzed the discursive material scripting of Facebook's ideal user, demonstrating how Facebook's PR model of "healthy" usership essentially rests upon contingent psychological foundations to recommend a eudaimonic construct of well-being. However, to reiterate the limitations of this article's engagement with script analysis (and to further reiterate its non-deterministic position), future research is necessary to establish the ways in which, if at all, Facebook users adopt habits of ideal active usership in their day-to-day lives, or if, indeed, users in any way view their social networking behavior in terms of well-being and self-interested social capital. Users may not experience the News Feed as its designers envisaged (Baym, 2010; Van

Dijk, 2013), for example, participate reluctantly on the interface (Cassidy, 2016) or even disconnect from the platform altogether (Light, 2014; Light & Cassidy, 2014). Interviews, questionnaires or other qualitative methods such as diaries could provide the user-perspective requisite for a full script analysis of Facebook's News Feed, which has been beyond the scope of this current article. However, despite these limitations, this article has still been able to show how the behavioral reaction to the nudges of the News Feed—understood by users in terms of well-being, social capital, "healthy" connection or otherwise, are integral to the production of the profitable data-traces enabling Facebook's commercial expansion. It is important to recognize that the development of sustained social networking activity through habit, regardless of the distinct quality of that habit as manifest in the thought and behavior of individual users, constitutes the universal basis upon which Facebook can continue to exist as a global economic actor. Repeated and active Facebook practice (of any kind) thus constitutes the quotidian mechanism through which individuals inevitably become profitable, and therefore, *valuable*, Facebook users, healthy or unhealthy, active or passive, ideal or not.

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