

Providing boundaries: Social media's espoused values through the lens of virtue ethics

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ABSTRACT

Social media firms and the technologies they deploy have become deeply integrated into our lives. Once limited to data input from our phones, the Internet of Things has extended social media presence to our homes, our offices and even our cars. From this privileged position, social media firms are capturing an astounding amount of data about our personal lives. In terms of leveraging this newfound power, firms must consider not only what they can do, but what they should do. Consumers trust those in their inner circles to play fair and by the rules, but technological platforms do not necessarily reflect the collective conscience of their users and leadership. This paper examines the power of a firm's core values- its virtues- to ethically guide and control technological implementation.

Keywords: Social media, organizational control, virtue ethics, espoused values, Facebook

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“Move fast and break things. Unless you are breaking stuff, you are not moving fast enough.” -- Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook

INTRODUCTION

Despite social media's goal of bringing people closer together, the creators of this technological bridge may be out of touch with the populations they serve. Social media is not immune from the double-edged technology sword of providing functional value vs. the unforeseen harm such technology may cause. As positive examples, the monitoring of Twitter feeds demonstrated the potential to track the Zika virus contagion and response, a valuable tool for public health officials (Vijaykumar, Nowak, & Himelboim, 2018), and the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic has also provided valuable communication and data used to limit exposure and “flatten the curve” (Hutchinson, 2020). However, misinformation distributed via social media has induced inappropriate responses, with the potential to create an ‘infodemic’ (Hua & Shaw, 2020). Popular press stories abound detailing how social media can negatively influence our daily lives. This ranges from invasion of privacy of users (Leetaru, 2018), to election interference (Mak, 2019), to deleterious effects on mental health (Whitley, 2020). Much of this scrutiny has been directed at industry leader Facebook.

These examples beg the questions: *why* are these claimed offenses occurring and how do institutional factors contribute? This paper will examine organizational mechanisms that can generate such negative outcomes, and illustrate the need for an aligned system of behaviors built around virtue and integrity.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). In 2005 only 5% of Americans had used a social media platform (Pew, 2019). By 2019, 72% of Americans had used some form of social media (Pew, 2019), with 3.2 billion daily active users worldwide (Tjepkema, 2019) spending about three hours on social media platforms per day (Gilsenan, 2019).

As pervasive as social media has become, its boundaries are still expanding. The Internet of Things, where technological interaction is extended beyond our phones into “smart devices,” is growing rapidly. Our televisions, thermostats, refrigerators, door locks and more everyday objects are becoming connected to the Web (Stasha, 2021). Kamilaris and Pitsillides have suggested that these devices now have a “social status” (2010). By 2019, 69% of US households had at least one smart home device (Martin, 2019). The integration of social into our homes and devices creates a staggering amount of data and information about us. Even our smart devices are forming social networks with other machines into machine social networks (Pticek, Podobnik, Jezic, 2016).

With social media growth, firm boundaries and relationships are evolving rapidly such that many consumers are not able to identify the boundaries of the platforms they use (Anderson, 2020). Based on the number of monthly active users and monthly unique visitors, Facebook engages the largest user base in the world (Lua, 2019). With potential access to this staggering population of users, businesses selling or buying user databases, developing technology

platforms, and/or social media services have proliferated and now are strongly represented in the S&P 500 (Levy & Konish, 2020).

Along with the growth of social media platforms and their user bases has come a dawning consumer and regulatory realization about the impact of this technology's benefits and harms. Of the 33,000 respondents to a global, annual online survey conducted in 2021, only 41% of consumers trust social media and 7 out of 10 consumers want social media platforms to protect their personal data, curb the spread of 'fake news', and shield them from offensive content (Ries et al, 2021). This leaves the question-- have firm internal governance mechanisms, designed to ensure fair and just use of the private conversations it has joined into, evolved as quickly as their access? First the realm of virtue ethics can be considered.

VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics is a product of Aristotle, who believed that humans achieve excellence when they live a life that is virtuous. Living a virtuous life adds to the betterment of the community in which one associates, and that community in turn can guide one towards behavior that is either more or less virtuous (MacIntyre, 1985). Bright, Winn and Kanov (2014, p. 445), state that the virtue ethics perspective is "grounded in the philosophical tradition, has classical roots, and focuses attention on virtue as a property of character." Although they describe virtue as being rooted in human character, they also note that it is a capacity that can be developed in a person and, presumably, in *organizations*.

MacIntyre (1985) conjectured that "a virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods" (p. 191). This individual quality of good character and moral behavior is also displayed collectively in the form of an organization and its culture.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND CORPORATE VALUES

Whetstone (2001), in his seminal piece applying virtue to business ethics, points out that "an ethics of virtues...emphasizes the process of personal moral character development" (p. 101) and that a hallmark of virtue ethics is that it "...is contextual, highlighting the importance of understanding the environment as it affects both actor and his or her acts" (p. 104). The 'process or moral character development' as well as the 'environment' affecting the actor/acts in these descriptions would naturally encompass an organization's corporate values. More recently, Dempsey (2015) defines corporate culture as intrinsic values of an organization's members that underpin the organization's goals. He further argues that certain corporate values (or culture) may encourage or even promote wrong or immoral behavior by organization members, and in such cases all other participating organization members also bear moral responsibility for those results. In other words, all members who engage with and share the values of the organization are responsible for resulting behaviors that stem from that collective culture.

Sadler-Smith (2012, p. 358) summarized Aristotle's virtue ethics to include the following virtues: Courage, Temperance, Liberality, Magnificence, Magnanimity, Proper ambition, Patience, Truthfulness, Wittiness, Friendliness, Modesty, and Righteous indignation. They also mapped those virtues to the following organizational values: Organizational justice, Honest organizational communication, Respect for property, Respect for life, and Respect for religion.

The first two of those organizational values appear particularly applicable to the activities of social media.

More recently, Paul (2018) has embraced the relevance of virtue ethics to the world of social media. He notes that social media creates communities that influence individual expression, social association, and development: each individual's 'self' on social media is primarily a projection constrained by the media platform in which it is created. For example, while the virtual self exists within a framework that is usually designed for algorithmic profiling useful to advertisers, users often engage in 'virtue signaling' for more positive online self-representations. However, as Paul asserts, a social media platform is an impersonal technological framework entirely indifferent to individuals' moral and social well-being. The development of virtue requires community, but online communities typically have low barriers to entry and exit with poor organization. A virtue ethics approach provides guidance on developing online communities for good intentions and outcomes as well as grounding them with complementary local communities in the real world.

THE CASE OF FACEBOOK

Facebook remains the top social network in the United States as well as globally, with 2.37 billion monthly active users, and 1.56 billion logging in every day (Hutchinson, 2019). Clearly its reach is staggering, thus any mistreatment of users or their data will justifiably cause alarm. Recent controversies involving Facebook's breaches of consumer privacy have been well documented (Gerrish & Idi, 2019). Venture capitalist Roger McNamee, an early and influential investor in Facebook, admonished the company in an op-ed for Time magazine (McNamee, 2019). He believes that Facebook's algorithms, which are designed to give users only what they like and want, has increased societal polarization and has harmed democracy. He lays the blame squarely on Facebook's management and culture. From this culture has grown what McNamee believes to be a lack of civic responsibility in the use and manipulation of user data:

"From late 2012 to 2017, Facebook perfected a new idea—growth hacking—where it experimented constantly with algorithms, new data types and small changes in design, measuring everything. Growth hacking enabled Facebook to monetize its oceans of data so effectively that growth-hacking metrics blocked out all other considerations... Facebook has leveraged our trust of family and friends to build one of the most valuable businesses in the world, but in the process, it has been careless with user data and aggravated the flaws in our democracy while leaving citizens ever less capable of thinking for themselves, knowing whom to trust or acting in their own interest." (McNamee, 2019).

In her book The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) is equally condemning of Facebook. She defines 'surveillance capitalism' as "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (2019, p. 1). Evidently, Google invented and pioneered surveillance capitalism, but Facebook has perfected it. These commercial practices are further described by Zuboff as an "overthrow of the people's sovereignty" and an "expropriation of critical human rights" (2019, p. 1). In that light, Facebook's corporate behavior could be characterized as immoral and potentially damaging to its users and society. But how do Facebook's values and culture potentially affect and contribute to its behaviors and outcomes?

FACEBOOK'S CORPORATE VALUES

Espoused corporate values are public statements by leadership regarding a company's underlying priorities and beliefs about how the business should conduct itself relative to various stakeholders (Rokeach, 1968). In the Internet age, these are commonly displayed on corporate websites. Dempsey (2015) asserted that corporate values underpin much of an organization's culture, and corporate wrongdoing is often indirectly facilitated by shared unethical values. Employees may even use shared unethical values as an excuse for their unethical behavior despite the fact that such organizational practices usually require joint, collaborative action. Valentine, Fleischman, and Godkin (2018) found that unethical corporate values were associated with corporate bullying and reduced ethical reasoning among employees. They concluded that proactive moral managers are needed to signal appropriate behavior to others, thus underscoring the importance of virtue in leadership. Likewise, leadership communicates its virtue via espoused values. According to Bourne et al., these publicly documented values "have a significant role in representing the intent of organizations to operate in particular ways and to encourage particular behaviors from organizational members" (2019, p. 134).

Bourne et al. (2019) collected 3,112 espoused organizational values from the websites of 554 UK and US organizations, examined how these values clustered relative to each other, and then analyzed the resulting similarity matrix using multidimensional scaling. The resulting matrix of espoused values was examined for patterns and this resulted in the dimensions displayed in the outer ring of Figure 1 (Appendix): Outward vs. Inward Facing scale anchors and Task versus Ethical Focus scale anchors. Values with Task Focus emphasize competence of conducting organization's work, while values with Ethical Focus emphasize concern for others through compassion, trust, fairness and support. The ring inside this outer ring then used value cluster descriptions to further delineate the espoused values with varying cluster emphases: Competence, character, interpersonal, and community. Values located closer to outside of figure shared fewer characteristics (e.g., financial strength) whereas values located closer to center of figure indicate significant sharing of characteristics (e.g., communication).

Bourne et al.'s espoused value framework can provide a foundation for contrasting Facebook's publicly stated core values and the firm's relationship with virtue theory. Table 1 (Appendix) illustrates Facebook's espoused '5 Core Values.' These core values were assessed for their location on Bourne et al.'s organizational value map in terms of similarity and proximity to the framework's original espoused values. That positioning is illustrated in Figure 1 (Appendix.)

As is evident from Figure 1, Facebook's corporate values predominantly have a 'Task Focus' emphasizing competence, market growth orientation, and enhancement of employee collaboration which would typically focus on activities like user data collection, data mining/analysis, and predictive algorithm development. Except for Facebook core value number 4, Facebook's core values lack any representation of 'Ethical Focus' which would emphasize virtues such as integrity, trust, honesty, social responsibility, and ethical practice. Austin (2018) noted that along with a Task Focus, Facebook's CEO often espouses 'techno-optimism'—a belief that any problems faced, including those created by technology, can be solved by further technological fixes. Manifestations of this techno-optimism are embedded in Facebook's policy responses to nearly every technological issue that arises, as evidenced by CEO Mark Zuckerberg's recent statement announcing initiatives to support free speech and to enable strong encryption: "This is the new approach, and I think it's going to piss off a lot of people. But

frankly the old approach was pissing off a lot of people too, so let's try something different" (Rodriguez, 2020). Despite the evident belief that technology fixes can solve bigger problems, most technologies are not morally neutral and can be used for either great benefit or harm—it will depend on the morality of individual or collectively organized human agents (and by extension, their collective responsibility as outlined by Dempsey, 2015). Austin (2018) offered virtue ethics as one counter to the technocentric path. As he stated, "The virtuous person is practically wise. She has the ability to use her mind in order to live intelligently, morally and in a goal-oriented way" (p. 4). Facebook's lack of emphasis on ethical virtues signals a commitment to competence over community, a failing that creates the underpinnings to a culture that betrays customer privacy and fails to fulfill societal ethical norms.

CONCLUSION

Facebook and other similar companies will need to rethink their corporate values (and resulting behaviors) or they will suffer ongoing and escalating regulation, slowed growth, and increased competition. Is social media the next highly regulated industry? As Gerrish and Idi (2019) recognized, "European lawmakers are willing to hold Facebook and other multinational companies accountable when they are dealing with personal data on a large scale" (p. 277-278). Recent calls for the development of a new U.S. agency devoted to consumer privacy and oversight of the technology industry further highlight the potential regulatory consequences of Facebook's actions (Tracy 2019). McNamee (2019) further advocated regulatory limits on companies like Facebook, stating "I favor regulation as a way to reduce harmful behavior. The most effective regulations will force changes in business models."

What will save Facebook from the harm of pursuing its current core values at the expense of an ethical focus? As Hemant Taneja recently and emphatically declared in Harvard Business Review, "The Era of 'move fast and break things' is over" (Taneja, 2019). A realignment of values with those of the societies in which they operate is imperative. Recasting Facebook's corporate espoused values through the lens of virtue ethics will be necessary to shape its culture, behaviors, and responsibilities toward society and the greater good.

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APPENDIX**Table 1**

Facebook's 5 Core Values (Facebook, 2020)

1. Be Bold	Building great things means taking risks. We have a saying: "The riskiest thing is to take no risks." In a world that's changing so quickly, you're guaranteed to fail if you don't take any risks. We encourage everyone to make bold decisions, even if that means being wrong some of the time.
2. Focus on Impact	To have the biggest impact, we need to focus on solving the most important problems. It sounds simple, but most companies do this poorly and waste a lot of time. We expect everyone at Facebook to be good at finding the biggest problems to work on.
3. Move Fast	Moving fast enables us to build more things and learn faster. We're less afraid of making mistakes than we are of losing opportunities by moving too slowly. We are a culture of builders, the power is in your hands.
4. Be Open	We believe that a more open world is a better world. The same goes for our company. Informed people make better decisions and have a greater impact, which is why we work hard to make sure everyone at Facebook has access to as much information about the company as possible.
5. Build Social Value	Facebook was created to make the world more open and connected, not just to build a company. We expect everyone at Facebook to focus every day on how to build real value for the world in everything they do.

