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Not just a tool: why social-media use is bad and bad for us, and the duty to quit

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ABSTRACT

With an eye on the future of global ethics, I argue that social-media technologies are not morally neutral tools but are, for all intents and purposes, a kind of agent. They nudge us to do things that are bad for us. Moreover, I argue that we have a duty to quit using social-media platforms, not just on account of possible duties to preserve our own well-being but because users are akin to test subjects on whom developers are testing new nudges, and we ought to deprive them of their test subjects.

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Social-media technologies have transformed virtually every aspect of our lives, and they pose new and challenging questions for ethicists about privacy, our friendships, the health of our democratic institutions, the spread of misinformation, and more. The future of global ethics includes the ethics of social media, and this field of applied ethics begins with the question of whether social-media technologies are good or bad. An appreciation of the depth of the moral problems associated with social-media technologies requires recognizing their global dimension. These problems are similar to other central problems in applied ethics, such as the dilemmas concerning climate change; for while social-media issues are not as threatening, they too operate in a global way, ignoring borders between countries because the technologies themselves are designed to be global.

In this short article, I shall begin by arguing that we should resist the view that these technologies are mere tools, neither good nor bad, and instead think of them as agents who can *act* on us. I argue that the most visible and pronounced way in which they act on us is by nudging us towards what is bad for us. I conclude by arguing that we have a duty to quit using social-media sites: not only would doing so promote our own well-being, but it would mitigate the damage done to future users by limiting the extent to which developers can test these nudges. This article is designed to call to the attention of researchers the growing importance of the ethics of social media as well as contribute an argument to this field.

At first glance, it can appear that social-media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, are mere tools that exist in a morally neutral way: the developers offer them up to us for our use, or disuse, as we see fit. We can bolster this view by pointing to the fact that

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some people use Facebook for good, such as by highlighting worthy fundraising campaigns, whereas other people use the site for evil, such as by spreading racist propaganda.

Although it *is* true that people use social-media sites for different ends, it does not follow that the sites themselves are morally neutral, nor is it true that the sites themselves are mere tools. One reason for thinking that the sites are not morally neutral is that they are built with design values in mind. These design values guide the actions of the developers as they make their product. One of these design values is that the technologies in question ought to be such that we spend as much time on the platforms as possible. This is part of what researchers have called the *attention economy*.[1] The term 'attention economy' refers to the market in which our attention is traded as a commodity between various parties, and different sellers compete with each other to win over as much of our attention as possible, in order to sell more of it to interested buyers. For instance, if YouTube can increase the time that we spend watching videos on the app, then YouTube can sell more of our attention to buyers than it would previously have been able to. This affects the way that the apps and sites are designed. Initially, Facebook designed the signal that some notification is available for a user to be blue, but the company later changed it to red once it became obvious how much more effective red was at getting people's attention.[2]

This illustrates why social-media sites should not be thought of as mere tools. They *do* things. Specifically, they nudge us. Furthermore, they nudge us towards what is bad for us. Let us first consider the way that they nudge us. Nudges are features of the *choice architecture* that promote the likelihood of a desired outcome.[3] The choice architecture is the context in which a choice is made. The choice architect is the one who desires the outcome and who designs the choice architecture accordingly. For example, consider a grocery store: if I am the owner of the grocery store, then I am aware that my fresh produce is not where I make my money. Accordingly, I make money off the imperishable and heavily-processed foods, such as candy bars; accordingly, I shall place the fresh spinach in harder-to-reach parts of the store that people can access only after walking through the aisles of processed foods. Plus, when someone goes to pay for their groceries, they will have to stand around the candy bars, which I shall place prominently and visibly. In this way, shoppers are being *nudged* towards buying the candy bars. One important feature of a nudge is that it cannot be coercive. The cost of defying my candy-bar nudge is low. Similarly, in online contexts, we are constantly beset by nudges.[4] We are nudged online when we are asked whether we agree to receive advertisement emails from a site, and the site assumes that we do so agree and thus auto-fills the box that states we agree. The site is not *coercing* us, but it is nudging us by automatically opting us in. We are nudged when we sign up for a fourteen-day free trial that automatically renews and becomes a paid membership at the end of the trial. We are not being coerced because we have the freedom to cancel it, but the developers are aware that some subset of free-trial users will not remember to cancel the membership in time.

The most pertinent examples of nudges are those that make it more likely that our time on a site or app will be extended. Consider YouTube's auto-play feature: when we finish one video, YouTube automatically loads up another video unless we opt to disable this feature. The queued-up video is one that the developers have algorithmically predicted that we will like, which in turn generates other ethical problems, such as the role of

these predictive algorithms in the spread of misinformation and the sorting of people into echo chambers.[5] Similarly, consider the way that some of these apps promote content as *recommended* or *trending*. By highlighting content that users are predicted to like, most likely on the basis of histories of clicked-on content (but we cannot say this with certainty because the algorithms are proprietary information), the sites make it more likely that we will spend time on them. When we do leave the sites, we can be nudged back by notifications, such as pop-ups on our smartphones and emails.

Hammers do not do this. Carpets do not do this. These things are tools in some basic sense: they are passive, inert, and waiting for us to use them as we see fit. Social-media sites *do* things to us. They nudge us, and, more precisely, they nudge us to spend more time on them. For this reason, we ought to reject the view that social-media sites are mere tools. They act on us as agents do.

An interesting philosophical question concerns whether the technologies themselves *are* agents. While this question does fall outside the scope of ethics, I think that there are some important things that ethicists can and need to say about this question. Firstly, we ought to acknowledge that the most morally relevant agents in this ethical scenario are the developers. To ignore their agency is to overlook the importance of their design values. Their values partly ensure that the technologies in question *cannot* be morally neutral. After all, the developers make the technologies do what they want them to do. However, the developers alone are not the only agents. We can attribute agency to the technologies in a kind of equivocal or metaphorical way. Consider the way that we often maintain that to know something entails having a belief about that thing. However, we might walk into a building, and the door opens automatically as we approach; we might, then, say 'it knew I was approaching'. We are not attributing to the door a belief, but we *are* capturing something right and important about the door by saying that it knew something. We are saying that the door is responsive to some stimuli because it was designed that way. In that sense, it is *as if* it knew that someone was approaching. Similarly, social-media technologies are not agents in a true sense because they do not act independently of their developers' agency. Yet, we ought to capture something right and important: they do act on us. Ultimately, the question of the agency of technology, including adjacent technologies such as artificial intelligence, is a broad and difficult one.

The next step is to assess whether they nudge us towards what is good, bad, or neither good nor bad. The evidence supports the view that they nudge us towards what is bad. To conclude that social-media use is bad for us, we can examine the psychological research that has been done. For instance, Twenge and Campbell 2019 found that adolescents who used social-media apps lightly – i.e. less than one hour a day – reported much higher well-being than those who used it heavily – i.e. more than five hours a day. The researchers also found that the greatest loss in well-being occurred as one moved from moderate use to heavy use. Riehm et al. 2019 discovered that time spent on social-media apps was associated with mental-health problems, even after controlling for the mental-health histories of participants in the study. Lastly, we can turn to Hunt et al. 2018, which conducted a randomized controlled study in an attempt to isolate *causation*, not merely *association*. Some people were sorted into a light-use group and others were sorted into a heavy-use group, and those in the former saw significant improvements in mental health. In other words, the more time that we spend on social-media apps, the

worse off we are. Social-media apps are designed to nudge us to spend more time on these apps, which worsens our well-being.

So, we are nudged towards what is bad for us. The design values that highlight engagement-based metrics are morally impoverished, to the extent that they encourage developers to identify ways of nudging us towards spending more and more of our lives on social-media sites and, in light of the psychological research, frustrating our own well-being.

The duty to quit social-media sites altogether follows from these considerations. Firstly, we owe it to ourselves to quit. The venerable tradition inaugurated by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and many other ancient philosophers that connects morality with our own flourishing and happiness surely calls on us to delete Facebook. After all, our happiness depends on it. This approach to ethics does not straightforwardly entail a duty to quit because we might be able to use social media lightly and in moderation, not heavily, and not suffer any harms. The problem with this possibility is that light use is difficult because using social-media apps exposes us to nudges that increase our usage.[6] There is also a second reason why we should not use social-media apps even lightly that is independent of this happiness-based approach to ethics that I shall point out later.

Not everyone agrees with this ethical tradition. Moreover, some people might argue that only those with privilege could so easily call for deleting Facebook *en masse*.[7] There does seem to be something true about this. Some people depend on their social-media presence more than others. Owners of small businesses, for instance, might maintain that their business requires a presence on Facebook and Instagram; members of minority groups might hold that they would not be able to communicate with fellows so easily without their social-media accounts.

The problem with this objection is that the costs of quitting for such people, and for everyone else, only increases every year. Conventions and norms surrounding the ubiquity of social-media use are further entrenched every year. If it is at the moment difficult for a member of a minority group to quit, it will surely be harder *next* year. Moreover, the measurable harms of staying *on* social-media apps are not relieved every year. If we quit Facebook, Instagram, and others *now*, we can more easily create new conventions and norms and at a lower cost than we would be able to in the future. We could at least ease the burden on our future selves and future generations.

Furthermore, the nudges, which make it more likely that we will choose things that are bad for ourselves, are gradually perfected over time. Consider again the nudge embedded in the color of Facebook's notification: initially, it had been blue; now, it is red. Over time, social-media developers get better at identifying which nudges work and which nudges work *best*. This is important because it means that users are akin to subjects in experiments. In a way, each of us is a person on whom these developers are testing how to nudge future users. The future users will not be nudged towards what is good for them but towards what is bad: namely, more time on social-media sites. We ought to quit for the sake of future users, if not also for ourselves. By quitting, we deprive the developers of test subjects.

This is yet another reason why we should quit using social-media apps altogether, instead of merely adopting light-use habits: quitting altogether helps make other people less reliant on social-media usage, and it deprives developers of subjects on whom they perfect their nudges.

One major problem with social-media apps is that even if we stop using them, there is a social cost that we will still experience. This is because we avoid only some of the costs of social media by quitting. Some of the social costs are felt by everyone in society: for instance, echo chambers and polarization undermine democratic institutions by making it more difficult for people in society to have a common ground of values or even beliefs about the world.[8] Many online echo chambers are facilitated by the algorithmic filtering of content: one powerful way of nudging us to stay on social-media sites longer is to show us only content that espouses beliefs that we agree with. This leads to the fracturing of communities. Even if I avoided social-media sites, I would still suffer the harms caused by dysfunctional democratic institutions. This makes the ethical problems around social-media sites even more pressing and urgent.

These problems and considerations will guide some part of the future direction of global ethics. There is a sense in which the ethical dilemmas run parallel with others, such as in environmental ethics: perhaps our duty to quit social-media sites is not so dissimilar from our duty to quit using fossil fuels or participating in other noxious industries. As the nudges towards spending more time on social-media sites are perfected, ethicists will devise interesting and important solutions to these types of problems as well as others in the same vicinity, such as those concerning echo chambers, polarization, and misinformation. In the meantime, we ought to consider what we owe to ourselves, each other, and future generations, just as we do in so many other areas of applied ethics.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Castro and Pham 2020, who argue that the attention economy is morally noxious.
2. This information comes from Tristan Harris, a whistleblower. See Lewis 2017, '"Our minds can be hijacked": the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia,' *The Guardian* October 6, 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia Accessed September 25; 2023.
3. See Sunstein 2012 and 2015 for more on the larger philosophical view within which nudges are a part. Nudges are the preferred tools of libertarian paternalists, who opt to employ them to promote the well-being of the person who is nudged (for which reason they are paternalists), without using coercion (for which reason they are libertarians). This view is distinguished from coercive paternalism, which regards coercion more favorably. (See Conly 2013 for an example and defense of coercive paternalism.)
4. See Campbell (forthcoming) for a more-detailed analysis of the choice architecture of online life, especially in e-commerce contexts.
5. For more on these problems, see Parsell 2008; Sunstein 2017; and Campbell 2023.
6. In this sense, it is akin to saying that we should avoid light use of addictive substances, such as cigarettes, even though most of the harm occurs only with heavy usage.
7. See Simpson 2022 for an overview of the privilege-based objection to the duty to quit using social-media apps.
8. See Parsell 2008 and especially Sunstein 2017 for arguments concerning costs of social-media apps that all of society pays.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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