

Seizing the Memes of production:

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat in Facebook communities

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Abstract

Facebook is one of the biggest social networks and is pervasive throughout much of the world with billions of users. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat is a state of government proposed, in much communist literature, as a transitional state from revolution to communism. What do these have in common and why compare a political theory with a social network? These are the questions this paper aims to answer and discuss. By examining the structures of Facebook set out for managing community and identity, through the lens of a political structure with documented purpose and methods, we can better understand how the results of using these tools may affect our identities and communities. This only becomes more essential after the recent revelations of the use of Facebook data in potential election manipulation. The tools and features around the disruption of classes and classlessness, centralization, and content production and manipulation on Facebook will be compared and contrasted with the methods and goals of the Dictatorship of Proletariat outlined in the ABC of Communism. Ending with speculation around the intentions of Facebook's approach to community and identity.

Keywords: Social Networks, Facebook, Communism, Community, Identity, Dictatorship, Proletariat



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With recent outcries surrounding the collection and use of data from social networking sites (Kennedy, 2018), we are seeing more and more how, especially, the online management and expression of community and identity can be unavoidably politically linked. While there is much outrage around the data produced by users being used to manipulate our current political systems, the structures and features of these social networks themselves already held clues that this was to come. On a commercial social networking site, such as Facebook, the way we are able to manage and express our identity and communities can be likened to various political and economic structures and theories. An examination of these tools and structures, contrasting them with the proposed structures and goals of a well-documented political theory with a clear purpose can reveal many clues. Thus analyzing community and identity on Facebook and contrasting it with the Dictatorship of the Proletariat can show how Facebook's structure and features can be used in suppression and manipulation while giving the impression of supporting users. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat also gave the impression of supporting the proletariat, as what could be considered a totalitarian step toward socialism and communism. In Marx and others quest to document a theoretical path to communism, they proposed the need for this more totalitarian system to be put in place before communism could be achieved. According to the communist manifest the purpose of the Dictatorship of the proletariat was to;



wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e. of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible. - Bukharin & Preobrazhenskii, 1922

Many of the methods to meet these quoted goals can be compared to the methods of community and identity expression on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

On these sites we see the modern day proletariat acting as the users of these platforms.

Facebook users are not the customer, but part of the labour creating the product. They are the labour power that drives the service through their use and it is also a place outside of other formal social activities where they have more power. Similarly to the Proletariat in a Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Facebook users are also constrained to the structures provided on the platform, under the impression these are good for them in their wants for self presentation, impressions management and displaying their connections. Using a clear interpretation of the methods outlined in the *ABC of Communism* for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, it can be seen how these structures are echoed in Facebook. In particular its centralized nature as a social network, how it "levels" the playing field" for users to equal one another, and the emphasis to produce and subsequently manipulate content can be directly examined against the features of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

The outwardly egalitarian nature of identity expression on Facebook is similar to the need for eradicating classes in the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. As a transitional political state, that comes about after the ruling classes have been overthrown but before a classless society has been fully established, it is a necessary part of the Dictatorship of Proletariat to enforce and maintain a level of classlessness. The Internet has generally already been seen as a medium that has the potential to disrupt classes, or at least be classless, as earlier works on



computer-mediated communication have referred to the "egalitarian nature of the net" (Papacharissi, 2002; Wellman, 2004). However, just as the need for classlessness in the Dictatorship of the Proletariat seeks to oppress those previously of the ruling class, Facebook's platform may provide a blank profile as a level playing field for new users to first present themselves through, this can also be used to suppress one's identity and even class. Social Networks in particular have been found to disrupt the split in our private and public identities. Pearson (2009) has explored the performance of identity on social networks and suggested that disrupting the difference between private and public identity can have "ramifications on network formation and interpersonal relationships". In Facebook's case, when users interact with their profile, connecting with others, making posts, and liking things, they are often performing these actions in front of their entire network. This is different to the context provided in physical world identities, which provide more context in settings. While before a ruling class is overthrown, different classes may have different levels of formality and politeness in their communication depending on which class they are interacting with, the classes one is and is communicating with is important in the context of how one must act. However, under the Dictatorship of the proletariat, this context does not exist anymore, as the aim is for everyone to be of the same class. Similarly on Facebook, when posting a status or commenting in a thread, the context of who you are talking to can be unclear; even if you were responding to someone else's comment, this is visible to not only all of your friends (which may include many different social circles, including family), but anyone else who can see the thread, if not the entire public. This can then lead to a disconnect in one's identity, if not have one's self presentation stifled so as to fit this much more public stage. This is furthered by Facebook's singular approach to identity. As Van Der Nagel and Frith (2015) mention in their exploration of anonymity of online identity, Facebook has a



singular approach to identity and attempts to enforce users to only use their real names. This differs from other social media, like Reddit, and offers users a chance for a more cohesive identity across not only Facebook's own platform, but wherever else "Facebook Connect" reaches. Chris Poole (2011), who founded a discussion board based on anonymity, has criticised this discouragement of anonymity for a singular notion of identity, and suggests that identity is more prismatic; having many different sides. While Poole may be closer to how a more authentic model of identity may be, the singular approach to identity that Facebook has, offers more potential for parts of ones identity to be both highlighted, eg. as one of the proletariat, and suppressed eg. for individual expression that would not fit the impression of classlessness. As class can be likened to a part of one's identity, it is also one of the sides of identity that could be suppressed on Facebook. This suppression and mediation of how people can manage their self presentation on Facebook is an example of how it can disrupt our identity expressions and enforces and maintains this disruption for the benefit in standardising these expressions as much as possible. However, unlike the dictatorship of the proletariat's espoused aims, is this standardisation of self presentation for the benefit of users expression or other power dynamics, like advertisers.

Centralization is both a core component of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat's mission, but also of Facebook's success as a platform for community and identity expression. To lay the foundations of communism the Dictatorship of the Proletariat sets out to wrest all of capital from the bourgeoisie. Once wrested, to be able to adequately direct and serve everyone's needs things must be centralized. Similarly the foundations of people's desire to socialize online have been found to be information exchange, friends and social support, as discussed by Ridings and Gefen (2004). While Ridings and Gefen (2004) examined virtual



communities just before the age of Facebook, these reasons have persisted and been further catered to by social networking sites. It could be argued that the web itself is a centralized structure when it comes to using it to find information, but Facebook takes this even further as a social network. People are attracted to Facebook as a centralized collection of different identities, as this, as Boyd (2006) says, writes community into being by centering networking these identities around “friends”. This centralization makes Facebook attractive to be a part of because there are so many people to reach and make exchanges with in information, support and more. As it has become a larger and larger centralized network, with so many different communities it becomes difficult to not be a part of it, and choosing to do so cuts a person out of the many exchanges made there. For example, many communities publish information about events using the creation of event pages on Facebook. Without an account this information is not only hard if not impossible to reach, as a user without an account is also unable to included on the public guest list of the event page. It also means that the user cannot engage with the community as easily by creating Facebook events. However, if one does have an account the centralization makes it easy to create these events and invite tens, hundreds, and even thousands of people simply with a few clicks. Such centralization of resources and tools would have been mind-blowingly useful for those that first proposed the dictatorship of the proletariat. Facebook’s use of centralization to form and maintain communities makes amassing resources and send out directives from the one place very easy. Of course this centralization is not under control of the majority of the proletariat in either the Dictatorship nor Facebook. A smaller group of the proletariat would be in charge of this centralization. In Facebook's case the people in charge are typically also Facebook users. However, while in both cases these smaller groups are said to have the aims of the rest of



proletariat in mind, it can be seen in both Facebook and historical attempts toward communism, that those in charge can easily become dictators, not just for the proletariat.

The need to rapidly increase productive forces and “spiritually refashion” the people, to better fit them to the will and needs of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat appear on Facebook as the encouragement of user-generated content and the sharing and manipulation of this content. Facebook makes use of information exchange being one of the top reasons for joining virtual communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2004) through more than just the centralization of people and information. Facebook also allows people to create their own content and share other's on their platform. Users are encouraged to make posts like; status updates with given interface cue's like “what's on your mind?”, pictures and albums of pictures, videos, and more. They can also share any of this content when posted by others. This all ends up in one seemingly endless stream of content in users activity feed, the primary page users read navigate Facebook from. This already adds up to be a lot of content, but Facebook goes even further through the use of Facebook connect. Allowing other sites, outside of Facebook, to integrate a Facebook comments section and other interaction buttons, like the “like” and “share” buttons, with that sites content. This allows people to not only engage with other content via their Facebook Identity, but also brings that content into their networks and communities on Facebook. Not only might this sharing of content make what might be a user's normal web browsing session in the context of the privacy of their own home more public; to both a public also viewing that content and to their own networks who see it in their feed, but this contributes greatly to the split in private and personal identity mentioned earlier. This split can lead to a greater monitoring and thus curation of self presentation, while also judging others from their content in your feed. This can become divisive in a user's



networks and communities, with the expression of opinions not encountered in other contexts; you may have grown up with your cousin, but the family events you interacted at were never a context where you would find out you have opposite political views. This could lead to greater policing of these views; either your own or theirs, or even a lessening of your familial bond with that cousin. As with the usefulness as a centralized tool, curating the views and education one is exposed to on their feed can breed conformity in both being on the service, and what you consume there. With Facebook's algorithms determining what content is shown, to who, and when, can lead to echo chambers, where people in a network or community only reaffirm that network or communities views. While Facebook says it aims to connect people it is also very much a walled garden, and has the ability to remove content that it does not like on its platform. However, in the spirit of "refashioning" Facebook has much more subtle ways of keeping content from view, or even promoting content it wants more users to see. Facebook has a set of community standards to which content on the platform must adhere. This is what the proletariat on the platform can use to report against when they see something untoward, and the more people who report it, the more likely it will get noticed. Facebook itself also looks for this content, and more. Through the algorithms it uses to determine what a user sees in their feed, Facebook is able to subtly manipulate users in many ways. Facebook has already run experiments on users feeds to manipulate users emotions (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014). This has many implications in how Facebook as a dictatorship may refashion the rest of the proletariat. While communities on Facebook may be able to act in mass as a proletariat to refashion or exclude others from their groups, the true control and power lies in Facebook's own algorithm, but does it act for the benefit of the users?



Conclusion and Limitations

By comparing the structures and features for community and identity expression on Facebook with the methods and goals of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, more can be understood about the goals of Facebook and its combination of features. However, it is important to note that while similar, there are definite differences that impact the distinction between Facebook's goals, and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat's goals. Unlike the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Facebook may be controlled by a small group of the proletariat, but this smaller group is not likely to be acting with the best intentions for the rest of the proletariat, unlike a true Dictatorship of the Proletariat. It is a commercial entity operating in a capitalist society, and as such is controlled by shareholders and others, like third party advertisers, that provide it the revenue it uses to function. This is a major factor in goal shifting, and being a commercial entity brings into question how egalitarian can the platform truly be when some services require payment. Facebook has its own hierarchies, and many profiles are other commercial entities. However, the vast majority of users are not these and they function differently to standard users. Standard users are what have been compared here to the class disruption and classlessness of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Even the Dictatorship of the Proletariat does not propose to eradicate all hierarchies and differences, but enforces the suppression of class hierarchies in particular. Facebook is also a practical entity that exists and functions right now, it is debatable whether a true Dictatorship of the Proletariat can or has existed, and as such is mostly just a theory. These are the limitations of this comparison, though some may have more to say about criticisms for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat itself, but this is not within the scope or aims of this paper, as the focus here is on examining a social network through the lens of this political model.



Facebook is not likely to be a totalitarian step towards communism, as the Dictatorship of the Proletariat is set out to be. However contrasting it's approach and structures for community and identity expression with the goals and methods outlined for a Dictatorship of the Proletariat can help us understand how and what it is doing. While Facebook gives the impression that it is here to support the proletariat, and it has similar approaches to a dictatorship that is run for and by the proletariat, it still is not quite there. Through this analysis we have explored these similarities and show their structural sameness, but questioned their purpose. At a time where scandal surrounds the recent Cambridge Analytica revelations, more questions about how and what our personal data is, how we can protect it, who has it, and what is it being used for, not to mention how much is it, are being raised. Many of the answers to these questions lay at the heart of the services that are collecting and harvesting our data, and it is through exploring their methods we can see where their intentions and results are lining up. Facebook is one of the largest, if not the largest social networks. What it does and how it does it affects the way communities can be made, shared and maintained, and our expressions of identity. It is evident that through the same methods that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat use that Facebook has the power to suppress, manipulate, organize and direct a society toward its goals. It is arguable how well this aligns with its goals of connecting people, or at least whether or not this is as much a great benefit to the proletariat as it gives the impression. It could be said that early communists wanted to revolutionize the world and connect it via communism. Perhaps Facebook has other similar plans, which makes it all the more important for us to build and use frameworks for understanding the effects of these networks, so that we can continue to monitor how these corporations use the identities and communities we have built on them. As Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta & David proposed in 2004 as part of their discussion of



communication and community, it is important for us to consider not just the benefits of these services to community and our identity, but also reflect on the benefits of privacy and the cultivation of individuality and liberty; lest we learn of its importance too late as it is attacked in the interest of conformity by our states.



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