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Facebook confessions: Corporate abdication and Silicon Valley dystopianism

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Abstract

This article investigates the public confessions of a small group of ex-Facebook employees, investors, and founders who express regret helping to build the social media platform. Prompted by Facebook's role in the 2016 United States elections and pointing to the platform's unintended consequences, the confessions are more than formal admissions of sins. They speak of Facebook's capacity to damage democratic decision-making and "exploit human psychology," suggesting that individual users, children in particular, should disconnect. Rather than expressions of truth, this emerging form of corporate abdication constructs dystopian narratives that have the power shape our future visions of social platforms and give rise to new utopias. As such, and marking a stark break with decades of technological utopianism, the confessions are an emergent form of *Silicon Valley dystopianism*.

Keywords

Confession, corporate abdication, disconnection, Facebook, platform power, Silicon Valley, techno-dystopianism, technology discourse, techno-utopianism

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Introduction

“Never get high on your own supply.” With this reference to the lyrics of rapper the Notorious B.I.G. begins an article in *The Guardian* that discusses how former Facebook employees started to campaign against the very company they once worked for (Hern, 2018). Among these apostates is Chamath Palihapitiya, former Vice President for User Growth. His farewell message includes statements that are rare to come from senior executives employed by platform companies, such as, “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works,” and “I can control my decision, which is that I don’t use that shit” (Hern, 2018). By slamming the proverbial door on his way out, Palihapitiya joins a small but growing cadre of former Facebook executives, investors, and engineers who are quite vocal in displaying their regret and criticism toward the very platform they themselves build and helped to grow.

This article discusses the public confessions of former Facebook executives, engineers, and investors. These texts are used to uncover dystopian tendencies in contexts, where digital media companies are traditionally understood as central forces for beneficial societal change (Natale et al., 2019: 324). Conversely, Facebook confessions, such as Palihapitiya’s, are gloomy and pessimistic. As examples of “tech regret,” they are similar to “regreditorials,” which appear in the form of a “big, bold, written apology, which can be either in the first person or as a third-person profile” (Tiffany, 2019). While the tone is personal, confessions are unmistakably political. We consider them as a form of corporate abdication by those who no longer have any fiduciary or other legal responsibilities that come with being employed by a public company.¹

Enfolded in self-critique, this novel genre of corporate critique aligns within the broader critical discourse that emerged after 2016. Dubbed the “techlash” by journalists, this backlash against technology companies, particularly platform businesses (Foroohar, 2018), contrasts sharply with decades of grandiose technology discourse coming out of Silicon Valley. The latter’s much researched “techno-utopianism” (Turner, 2006: 257–258) is rooted in “Californian ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996) and mixes idealistic tropes of “entrepreneurialism, meritocracy, and openness” with “countercultural ideology and neoliberal capitalism” (Marwick, 2017: 317). Up until the 2016 US elections, chief executives of US-based platform companies have shown to share an almost pathological belief in their corporation’s ability to make the world a better place (Duff, 2016; Hoffmann et al., 2018; Nam, 2020; Natale et al., 2019). By contrast, the Facebook confessions represent a techno-dystopian perspective as they focus of the company’s negative impact. As such, this critical discourse has both spatial and temporal specificity. On the one hand, it emerges from within Facebook, one of Silicon Valley’s biggest tech corporations. On the other hand, it takes Facebook and its founder, CEO Mark Zuckerberg as a target at a specific moment in time. As Yu-Xiao Dai and Su-Tong Hao (2018: 12) argue, technology discourse, both of the dystopian and utopian kinds, emerge from “different historical junctures.”² This suggests that corporate abdication is part of an epochal wave of techno-dystopianism.

As there are only so many Facebook vice presidents, (co-)founders, and investors who have the clout to have their regreditorials receive attention in the mainstream press, we naturally draw on a very limited set of materials. Our corpus includes a book, two op-eds

and 13 news articles that appeared in mainstream outlets that include magazines (*Vanity Fair*, *Wired*), newspapers (*The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*), public broadcasters (*PBS* and *BBC News*), and journalistic websites (*Axios*, *The Verge*, and *Quartz*).³ Collectively, we count one group of anonymous ex-employees (Bilton, 2017) and seven individual voices that belong to Chamath Palihapitiya, Sean Parker (founding president), Roger McNamee (investor), Justin Rosenstein (engineer), Leah Pearlman (product manager), Yaël Eisenstat (head of “Global Elections Integrity Ops”), and Sandy Parakilas (operations manager). This small collective of apostates breaks down into two sub-groups. First, Palihapitiya, Parker, and McNamee are card-carrying members of the ultra-wealthy Silicon Valley elite. As former or active entrepreneurs, their capacity to “shape the institutional environment within which they and others exist” arises from their business success, which is also said to provide them with a specific moral standing (Schervish, 2016: 152). The four remaining members of our collective are those who “have worked a rung or two down the corporate ladder: designers, engineers and product managers” (Lewis, 2017). While perhaps less wealthy or independent compared with their entrepreneurial counterparts, their rhetorical approach to corporate abdication and the discursive framing of the sources and solutions to Facebook’s “society-destroying” impact is highly congruent with those of their colleagues.

In the following, we draw on Michel Foucault’s (1978, 1986, 1988) writings on confessions to assess the roles and purposes of the Facebook confessions and then work our way back to identify the main dystopian narratives contained within. Our analysis builds on previous work that employs comparative close readings to discuss utopian corporate rhetoric. Most recently, Kimberly Hall (2020) analyzed Zuckerberg’s efforts to rebuild the company brand through a set of public *apologies*. Yuval Dror (2015) and José Van Dijck and David Nieborg (2009) examined a series of *manifestos* published by company founders, business consultants, and academics in a persuasive effort to construct and shape a celebratory, utopian business discourse. In these studies, technology companies are rhetorically positioned to best provide solutions to urgent problems. The confessions, in contrast, aim to convince the general public that platform companies pose an urgent threat to platform users, particularly children, which requires individual action on part of the user. Rhetorically, the voices in our corpus do not speak of “we” and are much more personal and speak directly to individual user to urge them to disconnect for their own and for society’s sake.

In this article, our aim is to uncover the tension between personal regret and its subsequent politicization in the form of corporate abdication. We begin by defining the function of confessions and the framework of techno-utopianism. Then, we unpack how the dystopian narratives contextualize the role of Facebook in bringing societal change and position the user within this system. We conclude by claiming that the confessions’ techno-dystopianism is coupled with (often unattainable) goals, thereby giving rise to new utopias.

Confessions and Silicon Valley utopianism

Late 2017, the first cluster of employees formerly employed by Facebook began voicing their regret in public. “I lay awake at night thinking about all the things we built in the

early days and what we could have done to avoid the product [Facebook] being used this way,” an anonymous ex-Facebook employee admits to *Vanity Fair* journalist Nick Bilton (2017). “For the ways my work was used to divide people rather than bring us together, I ask for forgiveness and I will work to do better,” Facebook’s founding President Sean Parker pleads during an interview with news website *Axios* (Allen, 2017). Palihapitiya on his part confesses that he feels “tremendous guilt” when speaking to a crowd at the Stanford Graduate School of Business (Sini, 2017). These deeply personal statements by high-profile Silicon Valley entrepreneurs arrive at a moment when the collective conversation about platform power and social media’s societal impact started to drastically shift.

Arguably, what kindled this fire was Facebook’s role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, the Brexit referendum, coupled the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism in India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, and Hungary (Vaidhyathan, 2018: 2). Late 2017, Facebook revealed that Russian agents had disseminated inflammatory posts aimed to influence US voters that were said to have reached 126 million users (Isaac and Wakabayashi, 2017). In March 2018, news stories emerged claiming that political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica received access to Facebook data of over 80 million Americans and that these data formed the basis of “psychographic models,” which were used to influence voters. Zuckerberg publicly apologized for this series of events (Hall, 2020), which served as a wake-up call to many who had been directly involved with Facebook’s ascendance. An anonymous “early ex-Facebook employee” notes that his former colleagues looked “at the role Facebook now plays in society, and how Russia used it during the election to elect Trump, and they have this sort of ‘Oh my God, what have I done’ moment” (Bilton, 2017). In his report, Bilton (2017) describes how the tide had suddenly turned and “[t]he public including venture capitalists, engineers, and the C.E.O.s of other companies,” started to criticize Facebook. The headline of the story: “some early Facebook employees regret the monster they created” (Bilton, 2017).

The fact that the surge of corporate criticism appears in the form of a personal confession is noteworthy. “Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth,” Foucault (1978: 59) writes. It is nearly impossible to cover the myriad of ways in which the meaning and definition of confessions transforms throughout Foucault’s writing or their different contexts, from Greek philosophy and Christianity to the history of sexuality. That said, we find confessions to serve two main purposes. The first is a *performative ritual* where one appears in front of others and a confession “exonerates, redeems, and purifies” the confessor (Butler, 2005: 113; Foucault, 1978: 61–62). The second purpose is a personal introspection of one’s guilt. Rather than to dwell on one’s remorse, the confession examines what went wrong to better conduct one’s own life (Foucault, 1986: 61–62, 1988: 33–34). Dave Tell (2010) neatly summarizes how these two characteristics appear in Foucault’s thought: first, the confession is a declaration of authority which “‘implants’ origins behind surfaces, ‘criminals’ behind crimes, ‘delinquents’ behind offenses, and ‘sexualities’ behind bodies and pleasures”; second, confessions create “objects of knowledge” that give rise to “new forms of control” (p. 113–114). In our case, the confessions go back and forth between private introspections and purposely public attempts to reclaim the control users lost by using social platforms. Speaking as individuals with moral authority—derived and

personally justified by the author's privileged socio-economic or corporate positions (Schervish, 2016)—our confessors not only seek redemption for themselves, but also appeal directly to other individuals to make the “right” choice.

By relying on the authority of the ex-executives and assuming that they know what they are saying—as former co-founders and developers—it is easy to mistake these confessions as statements of facts. As Tell (2010) reminds us, confessions are less about seeking or revealing absolute truths and more about conveying to others “the moral of the story.” He says that they are “topological.” This indicates that we should not take the message of the Facebook confessions literally. They are not so much truths about these technologies and how the platform actually functions, but rather efforts to construct and shape our vision of platform power by mapping and highlighting particular relations instead of others. Furthermore, Facebook confessions are topological in a second sense: they are part of and connect to the “discourses and practices” of Silicon Valley, which is “is both a technology industry and a cultural force” (Levina and Hasinoff, 2017: 491). As Silicon Valley is the place where these technologies are developed, it influences “the way people think about technology, political change, and economic development” (Levina and Hasinoff, 2017). Facebook, on its part, can be seen as “the paradigmatic distillation of the Silicon Valley ideology” (Vaidhyanathan, 2018: 3–4).

The moral trajectory of Facebook's public narrative, and how our corpus of corporate confessions play into it, unfolds against the background of decades of techno-utopianism. Important examples of the utopian corporate rhetoric are the business manifestos and public statements made by founders and executives (Hyland, 1998). José Van Dijk and David Nieborg (2009: 858) analyze the business manifestos that were published in the mid-2000s as a celebration of Silicon Valley's “countercultural ideals of communalism, collaboration and creative sharing.” Yuval Dror (2015) focuses on the S-1 Registration Statement—the mandatory document that needs to be filed when a US company goes public. Attached to the filing are optional personal letters, which founders of platform companies have repurposed to function as business manifestos. Dror (2015), in his reading of letters by Google, Groupon, Zynga, and Facebook's founders, shows a business discourse that consists of utopian narratives about making the world a better place by asking “their audience to take a leap of faith” (p. 548). *We*, the founders argue, are not your typical company (Dror, 2015: 541; 543). Instead of making money, “*we are here to bring value to the world*” (Dror, 2015: 543, emphasis in the original). We “give everyone a voice” and “make people happy” (Dror, 2015: 550). Siho Nam (2020) complements the personal letters analyzed by Dror with those of Twitter, Yelp, and Match Group and comes to a similar conclusion. This second set of letters, Nam (2020) contends, legitimize “new modes of capital accumulation in cognitive capitalism” through an ingenious mix of foregrounding “technological optimism” and the spoils of connectivity, while simultaneously downplaying user agency and concealing unpaid, free labor by users (p. 421–427). These studies show, as Fred Turner (2006: 258) argues, that techno-utopianism is not only about contextualizing technologies as revolutionary, but also about discourses of power and dominance. While social media business practices often concern ruthless profit-seeking at the expense of, for example, privacy, the techno-utopian manifestos are filled with high-minded idealism sprinkled with abstract notions such as “sharing” and “community” (John, 2017). Natale et al. (2019) understand this

discursive genre as “corporational determinism,” which considers “digital media corporations as the main or the only agency informing broader societal change” (p. 324). Chief executives are vital actors in this discursive practice.⁴

Instead of these aspirational and dominant discourses, we suggest to focus on the counter-narratives as they appear in corporate confessions. Like corporate apologies, business manifestos, and financial statements, confessions recognize the cultural and societal impact of technology but, as acknowledgments of sins or wrongdoing, they are foregrounded with guilt, pessimism, and fit into dystopian frames. In the following passages, we identify two such frames: the first deals with the unintended consequences of building a social platform, the second focuses on the negative impacts of hacking users’ minds. Together, they are hardly original, but the status of the confessors reveals them as important new ideological undercurrents emerging from Silicon Valley.

Unintended consequences

For a long time, Mark Zuckerberg has been one of the, if not the most dominant voice in shaping Facebook’s corporate image (Hall, 2020). He has been unequivocal about his mission: “to make the world more open and connected” (Hoffmann et al., 2018). Yet despite his best efforts, Zuckerberg’s ability to commandeer the public conversation appears to have reached its limits. In his critical history of the platform, Vaidhyathan (2018) argues that the company was very much built without a clear understanding of what it could become. Often blaming Zuckerberg directly, the Facebook confessions suggest that the platform’s negative social and cultural impact could have been anticipated. Ex-Facebook-engineer Justin Rosenstein echoes Vaidhyathan when he states that “it is very common [. . .] for humans to develop things with the best of intentions and for them to have unintended, negative consequences” (Lewis, 2017). Investor Sean Parker maintains that there are “unintended consequences of a network when it grows to a billion or 2 billion people” (Ong, 2017). The unnamed Silicon Valley insiders close to Zuckerberg on their part note that while Facebook was financially successful, it was also “fundamentally ‘immature’ with respect to its mission and the comprehension of its impact” (Bilton, 2017).

Technological mechanisms that were once seen as neutral and apolitical, or even able to save democracy, have become circumspect in the confessions (Allen, 2017; Lewis, 2017; McNamee, 2019). Sandy Parakilas, Facebook’s platform operations manager from 2011 to 2012, describes that during the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, Facebook staff was excited about how effective the platform was supporting democracy throughout the world. There was, however, no consideration of “the dark side” who could also get their hands on “the same kind of powers that had enabled activists for democracy [and] could also enable foreign spies and various malicious activity” (Jacoby, 2018). Likewise, McNamee (2019) admits how in 2016 he was worried about “bad actors,” who were “exploiting Facebook’s architecture and business model to inflict harm on innocent people” (p. 15). He describes how he contacted Zuckerberg and chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg to voice his concerns but that the Facebook executives treated his distress as a “public relations problem” and his concerns were brushed away as anomalies or something that had been already “fixed” (McNamee, 2019: 18–19).

The revelations of Facebook's involvement during the 2016 US elections and the company's incapability or unwillingness to address concerns of regulators and pundits, added fuel to the fire for our apologetic apostates. They became alarmed that outside forces used Facebook's advertising technology maybe not as anticipated but certainly as intended: to target individuals with personalized messages. In a *Wired* exposé of Facebook's internal struggles, McNamee argues that the platform has become a purveyor of political propaganda: "They [advertisers] find 100 or 1,000 people who are angry and afraid and then use Facebook's tools to advertise to get people into groups" (Thompson and Vogelstein, 2018). The post-election coverage convinced McNamee (2019) that election manipulation was afforded by the platform's architecture (p. 26–27). In 2018, Facebook finally acknowledged the problem of political advertising and hired Yaël Eisenstat with to fix it. In her confession, however, Eisenstat (2019) claims that she was never actually empowered to do so: "I don't know if anybody up the chain ever considered our proposals to combat misinformation in political ads." She maintains that Facebook has shown an unwillingness to recognize and fix problems on a corporate level: "As long as Facebook prioritizes profit over healthy discourse, it can't avoid damaging democracy" (Eisenstat, 2019; cf. Simon, 2019). She ended up leaving the company within 6 months after being hired (Eisenstat, 2019).

Next to pointing to election hacking as a catalyst of their concerns, our confessors point to deeper, structural issues. Palihapitiya argues that "this is not about Russian ads" but "a global problem. It [social media] is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and between each other" (Ong, 2017). Facebook Social Graph technology contains the "most detailed set of personal data ever assembled," which provides the platform with the ability to reach "most of the US" on a daily basis, Parakilas (2017) notes. As such, he implies that Facebook's architecture is designed not only to connect people, but also to fundamentally disconnect them (Jacoby, 2018). These views are echoed by Parker, who claims that the platform "literally changes your relationship with society, with each other" (Ong, 2017).

The emphasis on the unintended consequences of Facebook demonstrates two problems with social media platforms. One is the unwillingness among its chief executive to fix or change the platform's operations (Hall, 2020). The other is the role of technological agency. The narratives where the platform's design is appropriated by "bad actors" toward malicious ends can be seen as a rhetorical stunt to mitigate the confessors' guilt, but implicit in these narratives is also the belief in the powerlessness of the user in the face of the platform. In the techno-dystopian frames, technological agency becomes contextualized as technology's monstrous "power and influence over human users" especially when the technology gets into the wrong hands (Neff and Nagy, 2016: 4924). Next, we show that Facebook's power and influence over its users is visible in the confessions, and cannot be reduced to unintended consequences only as the confessors see it as being a fundamental part of the platform's design.

Hijacking the minds of users

Facebook's global problem, as many of the confessors imply, is not the specific problem of elections or even democracy but how the platform is "hacking" human psychology.

This understanding of social media users differs significantly from how users were framed during the Web 2.0 era: as entrepreneurial subjects coming together in online spaces where new technologies enabled them to build a better world (Levina and Hasinoff, 2017: 491–492). This optimistic notion describes users as rational actors interested in issues such as democratic decision-making. In the confessions, however, this idealized user has vanished. Instead, users are considered to have very little to no agency. For example, Palihapitiya explains, “[Y]ou don’t realize it, but you are being programmed. It was unintentional, but now you gotta decide how much you’re willing to give up, how much of your intellectual independence” (Sini, 2017). “All of us are jacked into this system,” Parker says in an interview and continues, “All of our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free as we think they are” (Solon, 2017). He goes on to highlight that, eventually, social media connectivity surpasses other values individuals deem important, such as real-life interactions, being present, or even intimacy:

When Facebook was getting going, I had these people who would come up to me and they would say, “I’m not on social media,” Sean Parker mentioned at a public event in Philadelphia: “And I would say,” “OK. You know, you will be.” And then they would say, “No, no, no. I value my real-life interactions. I value the moment. I value presence. I value intimacy.” And I would say, . . . “We’ll get you eventually.” (Allen, 2017)

According to Parker, the way Facebook exploits human psychology is through technological features, such as likes and comments. Similarly, Parakilas argues that Facebook’s

business model is built on the idea that people use this product over and over and over again for a very long period of time. And the way that they get people to do that is they built addictive News Feeds that suck you in and make you want to keep scrolling, keep looking, keep Liking, keep clicking. (Jacoby, 2018)

According to Parker, Facebook’s engagement techniques are a mix of social validation and “brain chemistry”:

we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that’s going to get you to contribute more content, and that’s going to get you . . . more likes and comments. (Allen, 2017; Wang, 2017)

These descriptions paint a dark picture of social media platforms exploiting neuro-chemical vulnerabilities in human psychology for the purposes of building and maintaining user engagement.

By doing so, these corporate confessions infantilize social media users. It is a perspective on users that resembles what Tony Sampson (2013: 126), tying early 1900 crowd theories to contemporary Facebook users, calls the “social somnambulist.” In this understanding, a user is a “neurologically unconscious social subject” whose decision-making processes are not purely cognitive or based on reason, but vulnerable for emotional triggering at the neurological level (Sampson, 2013). The social somnambulist, Sampson (2013) contends “succumbs to emotional appeals to his sense of fascination, attraction,

allure and absorption, and a tendency to become distracted by the animations of his environment.” In the confessions, one of these emotional appeals appears in the form of the Like-button. Leah Pearlman, a former Facebook product manager, and Justin Rosenstein, an engineer, profess public regret for their role in designing this seemingly innocuous functionality (Lewis, 2017).

Introduced in 2009 to signal “short affective statements,” such as congratulating someone or showing affection, the Like-button is an interface-specific way to socially validate what Facebook Friends think about other Friend’s posts (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013: 1352). Yet the button does much more than merely showing emotional responses to content. Each click or tap becomes part of the company’s “Social Graph” by producing data and metrics for the company and it is a constitutive source of information for Facebook’s recommendation algorithms that targets content (Nieborg and Helmond, 2019). If the Like-button began as Rosensteins’ mechanism to share little bits of positivity, it now has, according to our critics, become part of Facebook’s “psychologically manipulative advertising” bringing “bright dings of pseudo-pleasure” to its users (Lewis, 2017). According to ex-Vice President Palihapitiya, what social validation systems, such as the Like-button, produce is a “brittle popularity” which is “fake” and “short term” (Kozłowska, 2017). What is crucial here is that features like the Like-button are understood to exploit human psychology by intensifying users’ experiences. Palihapitiya maintains that Facebook’s mechanisms make users feel empty and vacant, and paradoxically wanting to fill that vacancy by producing more social content that gains likes, comments, and other indications of social validation: “What’s the next thing I need to do now because I need it back?” (Kozłowska, 2017).

While in the techno-utopian discourses, social media users are seen to choose to connect to make a societal change happen, the dystopian confessions align with the idea that we are “condemned to connect” (Rider and Wood, 2019: 651). Specifically, the confessions describe the neuro-social impacts of social media through the familiar trope of addictive behavior. The descriptions how the platform gives users a “dopamine hit” locates the source of addiction into the users’ brain, while the discussion on social validation points at interpersonal relationships as an explanation. These tropes befit a techno-dystopian worldview as it frames the users as social somnambulists whose mind, similar to software, can be hacked to serve predefined ends. On a more structural level, this narrative speaks volumes of how former Facebook understand the power dynamics in platform ecosystems and the agential hierarchies between users, designers, and executives.

The utopia of disconnection

Confessions of guilt-driven entrepreneurs and investors who lay awake at night can be seen as practices of the self, rituals performed by the sinners to repent, aimed at receiving absolution, so that they can move on. From this perspective, their confessions are emblematic of the rugged individualism that marks Silicon Valley culture. Sociologists will tell us that a sense of self-sufficiency, individual choice, and self-regulation are key elements of the “code” of being an entrepreneur (Schervish, 2016). This is particularly apparent among the most influential voices in our corpus: Palihapitiya, Parker, and

McNamee. As members of the entrepreneurial class, they perform their own, private kind of “moral boundary work” (Kantola and Kuusela, 2019) by confessing. The confessions should not be considered as an indication that this trio has or will “abandon their business and investment strategies altogether” (Schervish, 2016: 148) but rather as a transmutation of their personal moral boundary work into a public practice.

This public element of confession connects with Foucault’s second purpose of confessions. Next to individual stories of making amends with the past for the sake of absolution, confessions are directly tied to identifying the problem of Facebook and suggesting a solution. In the confessions, the apostates highlight the importance of users’ self-empowerment and the possibility to gain back self-control by quitting Facebook. While the rhetoric of corporate abdication signals a break with the upbeat, utopian dimension of Silicon Valley ideology, the emphasis on self-mastery aligns well with its individualistic impetus. In other words, the demand to take care of the self through disconnection hardly differs from the traditional values of Silicon Valley, such as the entrepreneurial culture of “doing it yourself” and the neoliberal ideals of self-surveillance, self-responsibility, and self-improvement (Fish, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Quitters in the confessions are the heroes; the masters of self-care practices. Sean Parker in his confession self-identifies as Facebook’s “conscientious objector” (Ong, 2017). Chamath Palihapitiya (Ong, 2017) confesses that he cannot control Facebook, but he can control his own usage and: “I can control my kids’ decisions, which is that they’re not allowed to use that shit.” “As users, we have more power than we realize. Internet platforms need us,” McNamee (2019: 517–518) maintains and notes that to exercise that power “we must leave our digital cocoon to interact with friends, neighbors, and total strangers.”

Similar to the techno-utopianism described by Turner (2006: 258), the confessions’ techno-dystopianism works as a lens to place the revolutionary aspects of the demands to disconnect in perspective and analyzes its power dynamics. Previous studies of executives in platform discourse demonstrate how technology companies draw on evocative, world-building tropes to persuade users, politicians, and investors about the transformational potential of their businesses (Dror, 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2018; Leong, 2018; Vaidhyathan, 2018). In the confessions, platform connectivity and its “contagious” architecture are seen to take a dystopic turn where what spreads is no longer good and its virality is a deadly disease infecting democracy. As noted, the confessions do not give Facebook users much credit for their agential capabilities against the captivating logic of social platforms. For example, the *Washington Post* article paraphrases Parker by stating that “Facebook is ‘exploiting’ human psychology” to “keep users hooked” (Silverman, 2017). Facebook uses “our emotional biases to keep our eyeballs on their screens”, Eisenstat (2019) exemplifies.

“When new technology first comes into our lives, it surprises and astonishes us, like a magic trick. [. . .] Their benefits are so obvious we can’t imagine foregoing them. Not so obvious are the ways that technology products change us”, McNamee (2019: 27–28) writes. For Palihapitiya, the problem of Facebook and the way it functions is specifically the enticement of emotion rather than reason: “We curate our lives around this perceived sense of perfection, because we get rewarded in these short-term signals—hearts, likes, thumbs up—and we conflate that with value and we conflate it with truth” (Sini, 2017). Eisenstat calls Facebook’s mode of engagement as “salacious” (Simon, 2019).

While connection and disconnection can be seen as having a binary structure, the confessions suggest this relation to be more complex. The technologies of connectivity are bringing individuals up to the point of addiction where they lack the will-power to disconnect. Roger McNamee (2019: 324) points to this asymmetry by asking: “Why don’t users abandon the platform in protest.” He himself answers that users would not quit because they are incapable of imagining being susceptible to psychological manipulation, data breaches, and other interferences when they sign up for a Facebook account (McNamee, 2019: 324). This *refusal to believe* has been explained with the framework of the “privacy paradox” which claims that users are too uninformed or negligent to care about their online privacy (Draper and Turow, 2019; Kokolakis, 2017). Research on the problem of disconnecting social media platforms signals that awareness does not make the solution any easier. For example, Eszter Hargittai and Alice Marwick (2016: 3752) observe that “users have a sense of apathy or cynicism about online privacy, and specifically believe that privacy violations are inevitable and opting out is not an option.” Yet, for the platforms, disconnection is a real threat (Karpki, 2018), and sometimes, these companies aim to intentionally obscure ubiquitous corporate surveillance and data mining, thereby rendering users in a state of confusion where the choice to quit no longer appears reasonable (Draper and Turow, 2019: 1830). “Media refusal” demands social and cultural capital (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), labor and knowledge (Syvertsen, 2018: 43), and is thus available to the more privileged who can afford to disconnect (Kaun and Tréré, 2018).

Seen in this light, the call to disconnect can be seen as a philanthropic project of sorts by the “super-rich” (Schervish, 2016), who are flush with both financial and cultural capital. In comparison with Silicon Valley confessors, everyday users are positioned with much more limited understanding of the platform’s capabilities and their minds being hijacked by its features. In the confessional narratives, users are positioned differently: epistemologically, socially, and psychologically. For them, disconnection becomes a new Silicon Valley utopia; an unattainable ideal.

Postscript: Silicon Valley dystopianism

Technological and corporational determinism and the associated belief in the capability of technology to affect social change has had a significant role in Silicon Valley’s history (Marwick, 2013; Natale et al., 2019: 26). In the confessions, the same belief is present, but now with a dystopian twist: the use of Facebook will eventually lead into the destruction of our psyche *and* our society. Ideas typical to techno-dystopianism, such as that technology will “deprive people of freedom and dignity and ultimately bring destruction to humanity” (Dai and Hao, 2018: 9), are present in these discourses in the forms of election hacking, fake news, addiction, and behavioral manipulation through hijacking users’ minds. Technology is still seen as a change agent, but not one for the better. The Facebook confessions, therefore, seem to collectively lose Silicon Valley’s positive belief in technology. We call this sub-genre of technology discourse *Silicon Valley dystopianism*; a temporal and spatialized discourse on the destructiveness of platform technology and its unintended consequences by those who designed, built, and profited off of them.

More precisely, dystopian discourses engage in the vilification of platform services by highlighting their harmful effects. While we can only speculate about the impact, these discourses are quite effective in how they tie into existing frames and fears. For one, the confessions tap existing moral panics surrounding emerging innovations. If there is on phrase that summarizes a number of confessions, one liberally used by policy makers, the clergy, and opinion leaders for ages, it would be a variation of “think of the children!” (Cohen, 2011). This frame is embedded in technological determinism, which runs as a red thread through our materials. For example, Palihapitiya makes an elaborate point about disconnecting his offspring from Facebook (Kozłowska, 2017), whereas Parker is worried about how children are particularly psychologically vulnerable when using social media platforms (Ong, 2017). McNamee (2019), on his part notes that: “In my search for solutions, I prioritize two things: fair elections and protecting children” (p. 491).

The emergence of Silicon Valley’s techno-utopianism can be located in the Hacker Conferences of 1984, Fred Turner (2006: 259) has argued. It would be an overstatement to say that we located the *fons et origo* of a novel wave of Silicon Valley dystopianism. Next to the ex-executives, engineers, and investors whose confessions we examined, Silicon Valley dystopianism thrives in projects like *the Center for Humane Technology* founded by former Google, Mozilla, and NVIDIA employees or the tech retreats and digital detoxes popular among the Silicon Valley elite (Fish, 2017). Dystopian narratives also appear, for example, in the context of artificial intelligence and automated systems (Packer and Reeves, 2020: 89–90). That said, by turning our analytical gaze on the Facebook confessions, we point toward the importance of mapping dystopias as they emerge from within Silicon Valley. Together with critical platform scholarship, these counter-narratives provide alternative stories behind the emergence of platform power. Despite the effectiveness of Facebook’s public relations campaigns and Zuckerberg apologies (Hall, 2020), corporate abdication may become a catalyst for more sustained and more effective instances of technology critique. In these situations, it is important not to take confessional rhetoric as truths but as temporally and spatially bracketed persuasive efforts. Central here is that the power of Silicon Valley dystopianism gives rise to new utopias. In the confessions, permanent disconnection—the absolute dystopia of Silicon Valley techno-culture—takes that role.

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Notes

1. The confessions partly overlap with the 2018 apology tour of Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg as it is examined by Hall (2020). Hall (2020) argues that Zuckerberg engaged in an “expertly choreographed exercise of discursive power” purposely aimed at not having to make any meaningful changes to “Facebook the platform” (pp. 3–8).

2. Dai and Hao (2018: 12) argue that “people’s perception of technology – whether they incline towards techno-utopianism or techno-dystopianism” differs “at different historical junctures”. They exemplify that the internet culture of the 1990s is one culmination of techno-utopianism while “[s]kepticism about science and technology began to emerge in the horrors of the mid-20th century — notorious Nazi eugenics, human experimentation, gas chambers, social Darwinism, and finally the first use of the atomic bomb” (Dai & Hao 2018: 12).
3. As our corpus contains news reports, there is some overlap in terms of quotes attributed to the different confessors.
4. For example, in his numerous revisionist accounts of media history, Mark Zuckerberg has rhetorically positioned Facebook as “social infrastructure,” signaling the platform’s ubiquity and neutrality as well as being a positive agent for change. Ignoring the asymmetric power structures inherent to platform markets, Zuckerberg rhetorically hails users as being on the same level as him, his company, and the thousands of its institutional partners. Rather than the state, Zuckerberg argues, “we” can make the world more open, and thus better, serving as an antidote to the newly rekindled forces of authoritarianism (Rider and Wood, 2019), making Zuckerberg as much a techno-fundamentalist as a market-fundamentalist (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

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