Civilizing Infrastructure [Pre-Print]

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Abstract: Over the past decade, commercial social media platforms have scaled up, in terms of the number of users, and scaled out, in terms of integration into public life, taking on infrastructural significance. This paper adapts sociologist Norbert Elias' conceptualization of the civilizing process to examine the role of social media in society, arguing that social media platforms establish socially sanctioned categories of people and modes of conduct. Taking Facebook as an exemplar, the paper analyzes the pedagogical, punitive, and incentivizing practices through which platforms produce social norms and societal ideals. From the company's ambition to become the social infrastructure of the globe and its expansionist history, to policy documents and moderation practices, to formatted interactions and incentive structures, Facebook universalizes appropriate conduct and emotional expression in accordance with the interests of brands and advertisers. With its integration of information technology and automated decision making, Facebook takes over tasks traditionally associated with institutions like the home, the school, and the workplace and acts as a civilizing infrastructure in a double sense: first, infrastructure itself is civilized by the ability to sense and judge people and actions, and second, infrastructure becomes a civilizing force in the world on the basis of these abilities. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the implications of civilizing infrastructure for our understanding of civility, Facebook, and infrastructural politics.

Keywords: authenticity; civility; civilizing process; Facebook; infrastructure; infrastructural politics; norms; platform; social media

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2b: Do not post engagement bait

What is engagement bait?

Engagement bait is a tactic to create Facebook posts that goad people into interacting, through likes, shares, comments, and other actions, in order to artificially boost engagement and get greater reach on News Feed. Posts and pages that use this tactic will be demoted.

The proscription against "engagement bait," or direct calls to interaction on social media, appears in Facebook's News Feed Publisher Guidelines, a feature of the Facebook Business Help Center that outlines the principles people should follow when creating and posting content. Rather than asking someone to Like[1] a post or Tag a friend, the guidelines exclusively recommend indirect forms of encouragement such as "creating relevant and meaningful stories" (Facebook Business Help Center), tautologically defined as content that generates social media engagement. Facebook first announced the automated detection and demotion of engagement bait in English-language posts in December 2017 and has since expanded the policy to include videos, comments, and 22 additional languages (Silverman and Huang, 2017). Discouraging people from asking for social media engagement is part of a broader strategy to combat what the company calls "inauthentic behavior," including the use of multiple Facebook accounts, "manipulating" the popularity of content outside of designated channels (e.g., paying to promote a post), and coordinating activity on behalf of state actors ("Community Standards"). The public scrutiny of election interference and the growing grey market for buying and selling social media engagement, with its risks to regulatory status and brand reputation, has prompted Facebook to institute and promote new policies and self-regulating initiatives.

We can learn a lot from prohibitions. For example, the problem of inauthentic engagement involves activities and political concerns that would have been almost unthinkable only a decade ago. Prior to 2009, there was no Like button to press, to say nothing of an algorithm's ability to detect and demote particular ways of talking about the Like button. Facebook's Publisher Guidelines also highlights competing influences on people's behavior: how the platform tells people to behave on one the hand and the kinds of behavior that the design of the platform, with the connection between engagement metrics and visibility, rewards on the other. Further, the existence of the prohibition testifies to the existence of the practice; that is, there would be no need to tell people not to ask for social media engagement, let alone develop a machine-learning model to detect it, if it was not a noticeable, patterned way of interacting on Facebook. Finally, the choice to restrict the reach of posts and accounts that engage in the activity—at least, as interpreted by the model—reflects an attempt to align the normative policies and platform design. That engagement bait emerges as an issue meriting a multi-lingual, multi-modal automated solution speaks to the transformation of Facebook from an online directory for university students to an infrastructure for social, political, and economic life (see, for example, Hoffman et al., 2018; Plantin et al. 2018).

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[1]Platform features will be capitalized throughout the paper except in the case of direct quotes in order to differentiate the names of specific products and buttons from more colloquial understandings of liking, friendship, etc.

Beyond indexing historical developments in the significance of social media, codified prohibitions on behavior also tell us something about the platform's interaction ideals, the particular vision of how people *should* behave as members of the Facebook Community. The connection between social norms and societal ideals forms the center of *The Civilizing Process* (2000 [1939]), a book by sociologist Norbert Elias that traces the evolution of standards of "civilized" conduct and people in the West since the Middle Ages. Although Elias was primarily concerned with etiquette guides and courtly society, his general observation that people tend to control their behavior, especially the expression of emotions, according to relations of mutual dependence with others, remains relevant in an age of algorithms and social media. As Elias, discussing communication technologies shortly after the dawn of the World Wide Web, explains: "The advance in technization has brought people all over the globe closer together. But the development of the human habitus is not keeping up with the development of technization and its consequences" (1995, p. 34-35). Facebook has significantly expanded the possibilities for global interconnectivity, pushing for integration and unification while simultaneously surfacing serious conflicts and differences.[2]

In this paper, I examine the role of commercial infrastructure in the civilizing process, using Facebook as a site to explore emerging standards of behavior and mechanisms of enforcement made available through information technology. I begin by introducing the idea of the civilizing process, offering a brief summation of Norbert Elias's argument and core concepts. Turning to the case study, I analyze how Facebook positions itself as a global infrastructure in terms of corporate vision and business strategy, how the platform proscribes behavior through policy documents and content moderation practices, and how the platform induces social standards through design, often in ways that conflict with official policies. I argue that Facebook both aspires to be and brings into being a civilizing infrastructure, in the double sense of being an object and agent of civilization. That is, infrastructure itself becomes civilized through its ability to interact with humans and, on the basis of this ability, becomes a civilizing force in the world. I conclude with a discussion of the political implications of this transformation for our understanding of Facebook, infrastructure, and civilization.

The Civilizing Process

The thesis of *The Civilizing Process* is that social norms of interaction, such as using a fork and knife or looking both ways before crossing the street, do not constitute an autonomous realm of human existence, but rather are fundamentally tied to the historical development and definition of a society.[3] Drawing on a comparative analysis of etiquette guides from France, England, and Germany from the 13th to 18th centuries, Elias identifies a pattern of increasing constraints on conduct, especially over the expression of emotions, which corresponds with the stabilization and centralization of nation-states.

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[2] This point is perhaps most evident in Facebook's role in facilitating war crimes in Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims in 2017, which a report from the UN's Human Rights Council described as "significant" and characterized Facebook as "a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate" (Human Rights Council, 2018, p. 12). For a general discussion of Facebook's contributions to conflict, both interpersonal and international, see Siva Vaidyanathan's book *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy.*
[3] Norbert Elias first published *The Civilizing Process* in German in 1939; however, due to issues of timing—namely, World War II—the book received comparatively little attention until its republication and translation into French the late 1970s and English shortly after (Aya, 1978).

Elias argues that social standards of self-regulation simultaneously shape individual conduct and support collective identification around particular standards, constituting, in other words, ideas of civilized behavior for civilized people. In this account, civilizing s a historically situated process that, with an adequate understanding, people can and should transform in service of human flourishing (Elias, 2000 [1935], p. xiv).[4] Given the emphasis on comportment and interaction, relationships and debate, the civilizing process is fundamentally about changes in communication (Linklater, 2007). In the remainder of this section, I introduce three central concepts from *The Civilizing Process* and make a case for their relevance to the study of social media and other networked communication infrastructures: figuration, the monopolization of power, and affect molding.

First, ideas about what count as civilized are tied to particular times and places, internalized individually yet supported by institutional arrangements. Elias proposes the concept of figuration to describe to the changing networks of relationships between people that, in turn, shape who people become. A figuration refers to "neither an abstraction of attributes of individuals existing without a society, nor a 'system' or 'totality' beyond individuals, but the network of interdependencies formed by individuals" (Elias, 2000 [1935], p. 482). As such, figurations provide a way to conceptualize the interdependence between social structures and personality structures, introducing a processual and relational mode of thought that is unabashedly humanist in its commitments. Another phrase Elias uses to explain figuration is "moving context," which challenges the idea of context as a static box into which people are placed and events transpire (p. 403). Although the durability of a particular figuration cannot be determined in the abstract, all figurations are contingent and reflect the negotiation of power between individuals and groups. In the contemporary context, figuration represents both the premise and purpose of social media as a network of relationships. As a conceptual lens, figuration directs our attention to negotiations of power, behavioral standards, and the formation of identity, both individual and collective.

Second, the ability of a given figuration to shape how people regulate themselves is tied to the monopolization of power. Consistent with the historical and processual approach, Elias notes that no monopoly is ever complete or free from challenges. However, as the state plays a greater role in controlling the use of power through, for example, the leveling of taxes or the exclusive claim to justified force, there is a reduction of violence internal to the state and an increase of violence between states (Linklater and Mennell, 2010, p. 391). The establishment of a strong and stable monarchy, Elias argues, had a profound effect on the structure of society and access to power. Compared to the earlier violent and shifting aristocracy, where standards of behavior were closely tied to the abilities and proclivities of the warrior class, the rise of courtly society promoted different attitudes and customs, first established among the aristocracy seeking recognition at court and subsequently modeled by the rest of the population. While the court played the primary role in setting Western civilization's codes of conduct, democracy has since picked up the mantle (Linklater 2007). Following this line of argumentation, social media researchers should explore if and how platforms monopolize power, define acceptable uses of violence, and incentivize or enforce social discipline.

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[4] See Linklater and Mennell (2010) for an overview of objections to the historical narrative and pollical positioning of Elias's work. One need not share Elias's historical timeline nor relatively agnostic disposition to the idea of civilization to find value in his provocation about the political, even existential, stakes of social norms.

Third, Elias introduces the term affect molding to explain the internalization of social discipline and the shaping of impulses, emotions, speech, and behavior. More generally, affect molding refers to habitualized self-restraint that guides our interactions with others. Such restraint is often first learned through the institution of the family or the school and becomes more specialized in adulthood through institutions such as the military or the corporation. The overall reach and strength of affect molding is tied to the degree of interdependence within a given figuration:

> In keeping with the transformation of society, of interpersonal relationships, the affect-economy of the individual is also reconstructed: as the series of actions and the number of people on whom the individual and his [sic] actions constantly depend are increased, the habit of foresight over longer changes grows stronger. (Elias, 2000 [1939], p. 399)

This is reflected in people's experience—an example Elias gives is "an advance in the threshold of shame and revulsion" (p. 451)—and in their behavior, the latter being easier to detect than the former. It remains an open question if this pattern continues into the present; that is, has social discipline increased alongside the increased interconnectivity fostered by social media and networked communication infrastructures? The concept of affect molding also directs our attention to the ways that people do (or do not) attend to distant others and the formation of mediated interaction norms, particularly concerning the expression of emotions.

This is by no means an exhaustive or definitive account of the civilizing process. However, the preliminary sketch of the argument and the associated concepts of figuration, the monopolization of power, and affect molding provide a foundation for examining the relationship between social media and society. The analysis proceeds in three parts, each organized around one of the core concepts. The first section examines the infrastructure of Facebook as a particular vision and material manifestation of figuration. The second section explores how platform policies and practices of content moderation set standards for conduct that, while they do not create a monopoly on the use of violence, do monopolize decisions about what counts as violence both on and off platform. The third section looks at an alternative mechanism of affect molding unique to informational infrastructures: algorithms and design.

Infrastructuring the World Closer Together

Facebook began as a representation of a particular human configuration: an online directory for students at Harvard University. In the years since, Facebook has become a figurative force, facilitating interactions, codifying relationships, and bringing people, organizations, businesses, and brands together in an extraordinary way. "If Facebook were a country," journalist Evan Osnos (2018) observes, "it would have the largest population on earth… That user base has no precedent in the history of American enterprise. Fourteen years after it was founded, in Zuckerberg's dorm room, Facebook has as many adherents as Christianity." In becoming the world's largest social media company with more than 2.7 billion monthly active users (Facebook Inc., 2017), it has morphed into a connected collection of over 72 apps, including Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger (Nieborg and Helmond, 2019, p. 212). While the company colloquially describes this collection of products and services as a "family" that supports the broader Facebook "community," it is also unquestionably big business. The company is valued at USD 720 billion (Trefis Team, 2020), has over 90 million small businesses using its products (Facebook Inc., 2019), and 37 million active advertisers (Facebook Inc., 2018b), to say nothing of the 30,000

companies using Workplace for hiring or the 700 million people using Marketplace to buy, sell, and trade goods (Zuckerberg, 2018b). Analogies to states and organized religion, along with conceptual frameworks like platformization and infrastructuralization (Nieborg and Helmond, 2019; Plantin et al., 2018; Langlois and Elmer, 2019), represent different ways of grappling with the same scalar phenomenon: Facebook has scaled up, in terms of the number of users, and scaled out, in terms of integration into public life.

The scale of Facebook is, in part, a product of policies, investments, and initiatives to expand access to (and the access of) network infrastructure. Its business model is broader than a social media service and a collection of apps; it also extends to Internet infrastructure, Internet service provision, hardware, and software. Having launched its first data center in 2011, the company currently has six active data centers around the globe and is in the process of building eight more (Facebook Inc., 2018a). It has invested in undersea cables and solar-powered planes that broadcast Internet connections (Facebook Inc., 2018a), technologies that facilitate the storage and transmission of information—and with that, status updates, photos, videos, augmented reality filters, and the other stuff of social networks. As the percentage of people on the Internet using Facebook has grown, Facebook has worked to grow the number of people on the internet. To this end, it co-founded the Internet.org initiative, which partners up with mobile service providers to offer Facebook as a zero-rated app.[5] Although the strategy has been criticized for being anti-competitive and a threat to net neutrality, to the point of being banned in India in 2016 (Shahin, 2017), the initiative has reached over 10 million people with the consequence that Facebook remains, in some places, the de facto meaning of Internet access (Futter and Gillwald, 2015). Additionally, the goal of expanding access comes up repeatedly as a justification for the company's ad-based business model, even appearing as the official explanation in Facebook's Terms of Service. Finally, the company has developed software such as the Facebook Home, a mobile operating system built entirely around social networking, and hardware such as Facebook Portal, a smart display for video calls, integrating Facebook into new places and activities.

It is in the context of these policies, expanding both user-base and modes of use, that we should interpret the meaning and significance of Facebook as a social infrastructure. Where researchers have used the language of infrastructure to draw attention to the scale, pervasiveness, and public significance of social media, the term also appears with some frequency in Facebook's corporate discourse. Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, first used the language of infrastructure to talk about the platform in 2008, although it did not become a prominent part of the company's self-definition until 2012, following ideas of Facebook as an online directory and a social network for friends and family (Hoffman *et al.*, 2018). The clearest expression of Zuckerberg's vision of Facebook as *the* social infrastructure for the globe can be found in his 2017 manifesto "Building Global Community." The manifesto, fittingly published as a Facebook Note, begins with the uncontroversial claim that global problems facing the world require global solutions, before arguing that global solutions require a global social infrastructure that Facebook is uniquely situated to provide due to its scale and focus on connecting people. Zuckerberg suggests that these connections serve a purpose higher than the

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[5] Zero-rating means that a mobile provider does not count the use of the application or service towards the customer's monthly data limit, reducing the cost of access while creating a market advantage over non-zero-rated websites and applications.

company's bottom line, generating social capital and civic engagement, cornerstones of a functioning democratic system. Following the publication of the manifesto, Zuckerberg changed the company's mission statement to reflect these ideas: "To give people the power to build community, to bring the world closer together" (Constine, 2017). As the mission statement attests, Facebook takes human interconnection as its premise and imperative, part of a long-term yet incredibly fast-moving vision to "build the new social infrastructure to create the world we want for generations to come" (Zuckerberg, 2017). Basically, Facebook aspires to be the mediated equivalent of both the public square and the private living room, all while disavowing any partisan positioning.

This tension brings us to the idea of Facebook as a communication infrastructure that simultaneously *infrastructures* significant aspects of our social, political, and economic lives. It is both noun and verb. As Karasti et al. explain, "it is not that the act of building an infrastructure ever simply ratifies pre-existing relationships: the act of Infrastructuring changes what it is to be a road, a unit of currency or an ecology. Infrastructures are engines of ontological change. They stand between people and technology and nature and in so doing reconfigure each simultaneously" (2018, pp. 270-271). Facebook does not merely formalize pre-existing friendships, communities, and interests—it changes the identity and meaning of those terms. Nowhere is the cycle more obvious than in the transformation of the meaning of Facebook itself. What once began as an online directory for university students has since grown so diffuse and ubiquitous that it can intelligibly offer the idea of its original service as a shiny new subsidiary product: Facebook Campus, a social network exclusive to university students (Perez, 2020). Of course, Facebook's expansionist history is also filled with expanding attempts at governance and the mitigation of conflict, to which the next section turns.

Terms of Society

Bringing people together has consequences—an observation just as obvious for a family reunion as for a global social media platform. To address the inherent conflicts of community, Facebook has developed and implemented numerous policies predicated on the ideal of self-regulation. Whether formal legal documents like the Terms of Service or more informal guidelines like Community Standards, Facebook's policies are normative endeavors with a "regulatory-like function" (Braman and Roberts, 2003) for how people conduct themselves on social media. Although there has been a tendency to treat moderation as an ancillary service or afterthought, Tarleton Gillespie has persuasively argued that moderation is an "essential, constitutional, definitional" function of platforms (2018; p. 21), their very reason for being. One indicator of the significance of moderation for Facebook is the number and length of its policy documents; for the main Facebook application alone, there are at least 15 separate documents, coming in at over 56,000 words.[6] Through moderation, corporations take on some of the functions traditionally

[6] This calculation is based on the following policy documents, as of 29 September 2020: Terms of Service; Data Policy; Community Standards; Commerce Policies; Advertising Policies; Pages, Groups and Events Policies; Self-Serve Ad Terms; Facebook Platform Terms; Developer Payments Terms; Community Payments Terms; Cookies & Other Storage Technologies; Facebook Political Engagement; Commercial Terms; Music Guidelines; Updates and Guidelines for including Music in Video. A Word Document or PDF containing all the full text and images of the policy documents is available upon request. A full accounting of the policy documentation for Facebook's 72+ applications and services would be a substantial task, and documenting policy changes over time would present an even greater challenge.

associated with the state, a transformation that Zuckerberg himself has remarked upon: “In a lot of ways Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company… We have this large community of people, and more than other technology companies we’re really setting policies” (quoted in Foer, 2017). Taking talk of governance seriously, it is important to note that Facebook’s policymaking is decidedly undemocratic. While the company does emphasize their use of experts, including the Facebook Safety Advisory Board, and forms of stakeholder engagement including discussions with community representatives, the final decisions on all policies takes place internally. At no point is Facebook obligated to act on the perspectives of experts or stakeholders; as a result, these efforts are, at best, a matter of information seeking and understanding rather than accountability.[7]

Limited opportunities for participatory governance and public oversight take on greater significance given the scope of moderation; if Facebook aspires to be *the* social infrastructure for the world, what people can and cannot do matters far more than the regulations of an online university directory. While all of the policies are, to some extent, concerned with how people conduct themselves on Facebook properties, we can meaningfully distinguish between policies oriented towards the platform and those oriented towards the broader world. The former category is concerned with creating a “safe environment” on Facebook that encourages trust, participation, self-expression, and conversation (“Community Standards”). Despite some recognition of local differences—for example, the acknowledgment that “words mean different things or affect people differently depending on their local community, language, or background” (“Community Standards”)—the policies are designed to be comprehensive and apply globally.[8] In addition to laying out legal rights and obligations, policies establish guidelines for how people should act and feel. Actions tend to be proscriptive; sometimes this focuses exclusively on the action, such as the instruction not to post “Content that depicts graphic self-injury imagery,” while at other times it involves considerations of context, such as the instruction to not post “Profane terms or phrases with the intent to insult, including but not limited to: fuck, bitch, motherfucker” (“Community Standards”). The discussion of feelings tends to be more positive and constructive, focused on how Facebook users should feel: empowered, safe, and respected. Platform policies, especially the Community Standards, mimic the function of etiquette guidebooks that Elias studied from centuries past, although the behaviors the policies govern include a mix of strange and familiar behaviors. Certain themes, such as how to disagree, have clear precedents, while other topics, such as “sharing content” and “engagement metrics,” would be far less intelligible to a reader from the seventeenth century.

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[7] In 2018, Facebook announced the establishment of an external Facebook Oversight Board to adjudicate content moderation issues and provide external ability. At the time of writing, the board has not begun operation and there are significant concerns about its ability to provide a meaningful source of accountability, reflected in the launch of the “Real Facebook Oversight Board” composed of researchers, academics, and civil rights leaders, operating independently from and without sanction of the social media company. See Newton (2020) for a discussion of the oppositional board as an index of the lack of faith in the initiative.

[8] Exceptions to the global/universal default stem from differences in local laws and primarily concern policies around data use, privacy, targeted advertisements, and the kinds of products and services that can be sold on Facebook. Additionally, just because policies technically apply to all Facebook users regardless of language and location, in practice, the enforcement of these policies varies widely. See, for example, BuzzFeedNews’s report on the memo from Sophie Zhang, a former data scientist on Facebook’s Site Integrity team, about the selective enforcement of policies according to potential PR risks (Silverman *et al.*, 2020).

Facebook policies are not just about cultivating a particular environment on the platform; they also engage with major political and human rights issues around the globe. As Facebook explains, "We aim to prevent potential offline harm that may be related to content on Facebook," although at times the policies seem to extend beyond platform-specific activity to include a more general commitment to "prevent and disrupt real-world harm" ("Community Standards"). Such harm includes threats involving the physical well-being of individuals and public safety, along with issues such as trafficking, organized crime, fraud, and the destruction of property. The concern with "offline" or "real-world" harm drives policies about what people can and cannot do on the social network. For example, the Community Standards prohibits "Statements of intent, calls to action, or advocating for harm against property." However, these concerns also drive policies around who can and cannot use Facebook. In addition to people who have had their account deleted by the company for policy violations, the following categories of people are explicitly prohibited from using the service: terrorist organizations and terrorists; hate organizations, their leaders, and prominent members; mass and multiple murders; human trafficking organizations and their leaders; criminal organizations, their leaders, and prominent members; people under 13 (or the minimum legal age in a country); convicted sex offenders; and people prohibited by law from using their products or services ("Community Standards," "Terms of Service").[9] Here we get a sense of the use of standards to distinguish broad categories of people, to separate the user from the banned, the civilized from the savage. Although Facebook's actions are couched in different language, the essential function remains the same.

Where Elias identified a monopolization on violence with the rise of stable monarchies, civilized infrastructures are predicated on a monopolization of judgment, including judgments about the appropriate use of violence. In establishing policies that pertain to the billions of people using its products and services, Facebook enacts a substantial monopoly on decisions about violence.[10] Further, the monopolization of decision-making shapes conduct through punitive measures, including disabling the use of a feature, disabling an account, or even disabling a large network of accounts. Facebook also encourages users to share the platform's standards from the presentation of the policy documents and help pages to specific reporting features that invite users to participate in policing the conduct of others on the platform (Crawford and Gillespie, 2016). Given Facebook's infrastructural status and aspirations, the policies and the resultant content moderation practices act as ideals for society writ larger, not just social media. However, for all the significance of platform policies, people overwhelmingly do not read them, and for good reason given issues in accessibility, the proliferating number of policies, and the inability to meaningfully make a choice about social media use (Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020; Fiesler et al., 2016). This brings us to another way in which Facebook governs: the design of the infrastructure.

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[9] Despite the seeming self-evidence of these categories, the boundaries of what counts as a hate organization or who counts as a terrorist are notoriously contested and lack international consensus. Further, this list only focuses on those explicitly and directly excluded from Facebook. Other policies, such as Facebook's "real name" policy, implicitly exclude people, such as transgender people, Native Americans, and abuse survivors (Haimson and Hoffman, 2016).

[10] There are some direct manifestations of violence. Like many large corporations, Facebook does employ private security forces on its campuses and has been involved in the operations of the Menlo Park Police Department, resulting in local community concerns about overpolicing people of color living in the area (Emerson, 2019).

Algorithmic Affect Molding

Official policies set prohibitions and punitive measures, whereas design sets conditions of possibility for interaction, tries to induce particular affective states, and influences the behavior of users indirectly through incentive structures. Design approaches to governance take advantage of the unique affordances of Facebook as an informational infrastructure that participates in human interactions, albeit in strictly delimited ways. With 2.7 billion users, Facebook is too big for humans to personally monitor, intervene, and assess the conduct of each user.[11] As a result, the platform has invested significantly in the development of models that can automatically assess and act on behavioral data. These models have been applied to the enforcement of platform policies—the machine-learning model to detect "engagement bait" is but one example—along with the creation of a personalized, engaging experience. As the company has expanded the possibilities for interaction on the social networking site (and its associated applications), these interactions simultaneously generate additional data about patterns in people's feelings, preferences, and interests. The Like button, for example, produces affective information at a volume in excess of 3.2 billion Likes per day (McGee, 2012).[12] Facebook can also infer information about people's behavior and affective states through automated analysis of text, images, voice, and sensor data. With recommendation systems built throughout Facebook, this data shapes personalized experiences that are designed to give Facebook users more of what they want, according to the ways in which the platform measures and models desire. Facebook's vision of social infrastructure is affective, advertising-supported, and incredibly personalized, with the movement of content, feelings, and people across the infrastructure determined by anticipated affective responses.

The personalized approach to design, exemplified in but certainly not exclusive to the News Feed, is also made possible by formatting interactions in ways that speak to both humans and machines. Friending someone you know on Facebook, Following a page of an organization you are interested in, Sharing a news story you care about, or even Liking content that you enjoy are all highly formatted modes of interaction. While the names of the actions borrow vocabulary from everyday life, they take on specific meanings and associations when codified into the design of the platform and transformed into user data (Bucher, 2012). The platform itself participates in social media interactions, guiding people towards particular paths through, for example, the design and placement of buttons. These choices also guide people away from particular kinds of actions, as Facebook's longstanding refusal to add a Dislike button (except within the context of personal messages) demonstrates. Although it is not always used in this way, the Like button—or one of the more recent Reactions—is designed to rank cultural artifacts (Pearlman and Chan, 2009). Likes, Reactions, Shares, and Comments are some of the signals that

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[11] Which is not to say that humans are uninvolved in the work of content moderation. See Roberts (2019) for an in-depth account of the human labor and human costs involved.

[12] This number is taken from an infographic published on the Facebook Business page in 2012 prior to Facebook's acquisition of Instagram. Facebook passed one billion monthly active users in the third quarter of 2012. Today, it boasts over 2.7 billion monthly active users. However, Facebook has not released an updated statistic on the number of daily Likes since 2012. However, Instagram publicized the number of posts and Likes per day in 2016: 95 million posts, 4.2 billion Likes per day (Schlosser, 2016). Together, these numbers support my general point that the Like button facilitates the collection of information about people's feelings and preferences on a mass scale.

Facebook uses in selecting and ordering content within the News Feed. Finally, Facebook's approach to formatting interactions is not restricted to company's family of applications; indeed, many of the features have become standard for social media platforms and integrated across the web (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013), shaping how we understand and talk about liking, sharing, and friendship generally (McCulloch, 2019; John, 2017).

With formatted interactions and automated inferences, Facebook personalizes recommendations and design choices in order to cultivate engagement and, in so doing, molds affective states algorithmically. Engagement is only one of many possible ends for this kind of design; indeed, other applications of affective molding have been tested and considered, such as the Facebook emotional contagion study (Hallinan *et al.,* 2020), but it is difficult to say what other affective considerations have been implemented on the platform due to the black-boxing of its recommendation and ranking algorithms. Although there is growing interest in the expansion of algorithms into culture and public life (e.g., Pasquale, 2015; Striphas, 2015; Gillespie, 2014; Hallinan and Striphas, 2016; Bucher, 2019; Noble, 2018), much of this work has focused on changing knowledge regimes. While this framing, and the related focus on the objectivity of algorithms, encapsulates the work of Google and other search engines, it fits less well with social media. With its focus on engagement, social media recommendation algorithms are less knowledge brokers than feeling brokers. When recommendation systems contribute to a general experience rather than recommend specific products, places, or facts, feelings are particularly important.

Feeling brokers, like other recommendation algorithms, create incentive structures; on Facebook, this works through the control of visibility and the concomitant threat of invisibility (Bucher, 2012). Engagement acts as the dominant paradigm for what and who gets seen, at least without paying money for the privilege. When algorithms reward engagement with visibility, it can seem as if the infrastructure itself implicitly issues a mandate to create engaging content and, as a result, people are left to try to figure out how the platform's recommendations works. The growing literature on folk theories of algorithms, or the everyday ways people interpret the actions of algorithmic systems, offers insights on this process (Eslami *et al.*, 2015; Devito *et al.*, 2018; Siles *et al.*, 2020), even as it tends to focus on individual interpretations and responses. Similarly, research on content creators and influencers shows patterned ways of interpreting the audience information systems built into social media (Duffy, 2017; Hallinan, 2019). Despite the lack of access to information, many users form theories about what kinds of conduct will be rewarded by "the algorithm" and adjust their use of the platform accordingly. The mandate to create engaging content moves from implicit to explicit in Facebook's communication with small businesses and advertisers. Similarly, Facebook's ad-market pricing factors predictions of engagement into the price of its advertisements, so that ads likely to generate engagement effectively cost less to run than other ads (Martinez, 2018). Taken together, "turning toward the algorithm" (Gillespie, 2014) on Facebook involves the management of emotions, from pressing the Like button to acting in the face of inescapable information about the affective reactions of others.

The two systems setting social standards for self-regulation, policy and design, do not always serve the same ends. To put it differently, that which engages is not always good. The tension between policy and design is evident in Facebook's 2018 announcement of "borderline" content policies. In a Note titled "A Blueprint for Content Governance and Enforcement," Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook would begin demoting content that approaches violations of the Community Guidelines (Zuckerberg, 2018a). The Note explained that people "engage disproportionately with more sensationalist and provocative content," which creates an incentive problem where people are rewarded with high engagement levels,

and thus high visibility, for making content that skirts the edge of permissibility. By deliberately leaving the category of borderline content vague and demoting its circulation through recommendations, the platform tries to account for the excesses of engagement while preserving its underlying value and structure. Indeed, the policy is based on the idea of a "natural engagement pattern" and a belief that the problems associated with engagement can by addressed by penalizing the circulation of certain kinds of content. The continued commitment to the engagement paradigm is unsurprising; engagement has long been a theme of Facebook's communications to investors because, as former CFO David A. Ebersman summarizes, "engagement remains a foundation for everything we're trying to build" (Facebook Inc., 2013).[13]

Bringing the world closer together, for Facebook, is a project of incredible scale where the interactions of its 2.7 billion users are coordinated, in no small part, through affect-oriented algorithms. Facebook's model of social infrastructure universalizes appropriate conduct and emotional expression in accordance with the interests of brands and advertisers. This is decidedly *not* a natural manifestation of engagement—it is carefully cultivated and commercially exploited, civilizing through a combination of policy and design. The construction of Facebook as a civilizing infrastructure, along with its particular vision of civilization, is a profoundly political choice that must be recognized as such, a project to which the final section now turns.

The Politics of Civilizing Infrastructure

Let us return once again to Facebook's News Feed Publisher Guidelines and the discussion of engagement bait. The guidelines conclude with the following question and answer:

> Q: Is this an example of Facebook making editorial decisions?
> A: No, Facebook is using a machine learning model to demote content that people have told us that they dislike. (Facebook Business Help Center)

The question raises the specter of bias and censorship that haunts public discourse on the operations of the social media giant, especially in the United States. In so doing, the question acknowledges the potential concerns of the reader, admitting to demoting particular kinds of content. The answer, however, dismisses the relevance of the concerns, positioning a "machine learning model" and people's stated preferences—from unspecified and proprietary opinion surveys—against the charges of editorial intervention. This is a false opposition; recommendation and moderation algorithms are fundamentally editorial actors, carefully designed by Facebook to promote content that the platform deems worthy and remove content judged inappropriate or undesirable. Further, the appeal to the stated preferences of its users rings hollow in the context of the company's long history of dismissing stated preferences in favor of behavioral (engagement) data following design changes.[14] And even if we take the explanation at face value, the choice to give people what they want *is* an editorial paradigm. Facebook actively

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[13] Facebook repeatedly highlights engagement metrics in quarterly earnings calls as key to the value of social media and engagement drives the company's long-term strategy for all of its applications, including Instagram (Zuckerberg, 2018, 2019).

[14] Including, notably, the introduction of the News Feed. See Hoffman *et al*. for an in-depth analysis of how Mark Zuckerberg constructs the Facebook user and their interest (2018).

shapes social standards of interaction through design and policy choices, which takes on greater significance given the size and reach of its products and services, acutely reflected in the company's mission to act as *the* social infrastructure for the globe. In other words, Facebook is not merely a communication infrastructure, transmitting information across geographically dispersed locations, but a civilizing infrastructure, sensing, participating in, and setting standards for human interaction.

In this paper, I have introduced and extended Norbert Elias's conceptual framework of the civilizing process as a way to make sense of the relationship between social media and society. Drawing specifically on the ideas of figuration, the monopolization of power, and affect molding, I have shown how social standards continue to be articulated alongside societal ideals, even as Facebook's ideals are significantly more commercial and infrastructural than previous figurations of civilization. Having established this connection, I briefly discuss what this implies for our understandings of civility, Facebook, and the politics of infrastructure.

First, the formulation of the civilizing process offers a reminder of the etymological roots of civility. Social standards are not autonomous and unchanging. Instead, they are historical, performatively upheld and transformed, and fundamentally political—an argument further strengthened by the use of civility for racial distinction and discrimination (Báez and Ore, 2018). Standards of civilized conduct are always bound up in projects of collective identity and boundary drawing. As such, we should approach social norms and standards as part of power-laden processes rather than as objective states. Efforts to identify and codify standards of civility, including, for example, research associated with the National Institute for Civil Discourse in the United States, often adopt a similar position as Facebook, framing standards as non-partisan and non-political by appealing to surveys of people's stated preferences and beliefs. While such evidence can give us a sense of the current dominance of a particular standard, it does not demonstrate its neutral or objective character, nor does it give reason for the standard to be endorsed moving forward. A figurational approach towards civility directs our attention to the means through which standards are created, maintained, and contested—which, as the case of Facebook suggests, is increasingly enacted through social media platforms.

The conduct that we associate with social media platforms, especially around political speech, does not fit neatly with older ideals of democratic discourse. Drawing on a case study of President Donald Trump's social media use, Bratslavskey *et al.* argue that Twitter acts as an "infrastructure of incivility" that contributes "to a devaluation of normative democratic discourses" (p. 596). While I certainly agree that platforms play a role in shaping values and social standards, and that standards are subject to change, I disagree with their diagnosis of rage, spectacle, and other strategies of grabbing attention as outside the bounds of civility. Instead, these behaviors, incentivized by social media platforms, take on normative valence and participate in setting new standards, changing our ideas about who counts as civilized and how civilized people behave. Treating social media infrastructures as forces of civilization shifts the attention away from the political strategies of individuals to the structuring forces in which individuals come to be, and also moves the concern with social standards beyond a focus on electoral politics. Nothing about this trajectory is natural or inevitable, despite a recent statement to the contrary from an unnamed Facebook executive who argued that "Right-wing populism is always more engaging" because it invokes strong emotional responses associated with the nation in response to public concern that Facebook recommendation algorithms favor conservative posts (Thompson, 2020). The executive's reference to the popularity of populism in contemporary tabloids and 1930s radio broadcasts does not

absolve Facebook's responsibility; instead, it highlights the deeply entrenched incentive structures of centralized, ad-driven media systems that connects mass communication to contemporary social media.

As the brief reference to Twitter's role in political communication suggests, Facebook is not the only civilizing infrastructure, despite its dominant position. Instead, the use of infrastructure for social discipline happens across social media platforms and is even spreading beyond social media into the built environment, highlighted in the installation of happiness meters on government websites and public spaces throughout Dubai under the campaign of becoming the "happiest city on earth" (Davies, 2016, p. 34). Other instantiations include security surveillance systems installed in schools, airports, and public spaces designed to automatically detect threats both potential and actual. In social media and public security alike, smart infrastructure acts as a means of control, even though control is easier to detect when it concerns access to public spaces compared with access to a globally distributed audience. While Elias recognized that technology could be a tool of affective molding (e.g., the availability of indoor plumbing or spoons), the development of smart infrastructure changes how this plays out, allowing molding to be far more centralized, dynamic, and immediately responsive.

Of course, this is only a small, partial sketch of the contemporary civilizing process, a provocation to consider the relationship between infrastructure, social standards, and civilization. Much work remains to be done, including the identification and interpretation of additional ways in which infrastructure shapes conduct. Although the analysis of Facebook demonstrates the importance of the threat of invisibility as a mechanism of control, future work could move beyond design choices to consider the role of celebrity, or visibility successfully attained, in setting standards. Additionally, while information infrastructures allow for more fine-grained attempts at control that cut across social support and political mobilization alike, the civilizing process always emerges from a given figuration and is never fully controlled. This means that we need to look beyond the efforts at civilizing to study how people live with these infrastructures, and how we as a public wish to engage them. Drawing on an older sense of the term as a "battle, conflict, encounter," the time has come to engage the engagement model of social media ('engagement, n.', 2019). Civilization itself may depend on it.

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