Tweeting from the Tower: Exploring the Role of Critical Educators in the Digital Age

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Abstract

New developments in digital technologies have caused dramatic shifts in public education. The purpose of this paper is to address these tensions in order to explore the compatibility of critical pedagogy with digital scholarship. We ultimately argue that many of these new technologies, and the pedagogies they give rise to, tend to neutralize the corporeal presence of gender, race, and sexuality, among other identities that are integral to fostering dialogue that supports the process of critical inquiry and humanization.

Keywords: *educational technology, critical pedagogy, social media, higher education*

Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies, particularly social media, has in recent years dramatically shifted the landscape of public discourse. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have, as is commonly argued, democratized public discourse by increasing the plurality of voices on a range of political issues through online "discussions." Setting aside issues of parity in digital infrastructure and access to the Internet, such platforms have indeed widened the arena of public discourse.

These changes in the technological landscape, however, have given rise to new challenges for scholars working in critical traditions, particularly critical pedagogy. As both a philosophical and pedagogical school of thought, critical pedagogy vehemently rejects the "ivory tower" approach to academia, instead favoring "problem posing" alongside and *with* students toward the aim of social justice. With regard to rejecting the traditional power structure embedded in the student/teacher dichotomy through the promotion of critical dialogue, the structure of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter seem, *prima facie* to offer unique possibilities for academics working in the tradition of critical pedagogy to perhaps, more conveniently, engage in the type of "public scholarship" that has been encouraged by those such as Henry Giroux (Giroux, 2011), Peter McLaren (McLaren, 1998), and bell hooks (hooks, 1994). Particularly for educators, the ability to engage across multiple platforms on a variety of issues with individuals other than formal students, often in real time, arguably opens up the possibility for public scholarship in a way not previously imagined by the forbears of critical pedagogy by allowing for any individual with an Internet connection to "plug into" public discourse.

Recently, however, cultural theorists have pointed out that social media platforms frequently result in increased polarization and division between users, rather than a deepened sense of understanding between interlocutors (Bilton, 2014). Recent studies have even indicated that

online interactions can *decrease* empathy for others' viewpoints, allowing users to dehumanize those with whom they are engaging online (Lohmann, 2010). This may be perhaps most apparent in our contemporary political discourse, and the vitriolic turn on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter leading up to and since the 2016 presidential election.

If the purpose of academics engaging in this sort of "digital scholarship" is similar to the aim of most critical classrooms—to carve out the space for meaningful dialogue in order to forge new understandings for the aim of cultivating agents of change—then we argue that online platforms pose several key limitations for engaging in digital critical pedagogy. Namely, we argue that several key tenets of critical pedagogy, namely dialogue and humanization, are meaningfully compromised on digital platforms. In order to engage with other papers across this special issue by exploring the question "to what extent professors and instructors should engage in public scholarship across digital platforms," we argue that clearly conceptualizing the strengths and limitations of online engagement must *precede* the question of *how*, *when*, or *whether* scholars ought to be *digital* pedagogues. We support the notion that academics ought to find ways to challenge the "normative conceptions of scholarship," however, we caution that the pedagogical, epistemological, and philosophical limitations of digital pedagogies be carefully considered. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is threefold: We aim to 1) Discuss the limitations of social media as a democratic platform by outlining the ways in which power is embedded into popular online platforms; 2) Explore the ways in which the key tenets of critical pedagogy are commonly compromised on social media platforms and; 3) Assert that the most valuable work for critical educators remains embodied, sustained, and most importantly, executed IRL (in real life).

Beyond a Tool: Technology as an Axis of Power

Identifying and confronting systems of power lies at the heart of the project of critical pedagogy. Indeed, As Peter McLaren (1998) explains, "[c]ritical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the schools, and the material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state"(p. 441-442). Theorizing oppressive systems of power in the education system surrounding issues of race, gender, ethnocentric curriculum, and social class have all been vital to developing a robust framework for critical pedagogy. Drawing on the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory, Latin American philosophies of resistance, and the cultural critiques of both feminist theory as well as Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions, the central project of critical pedagogy is to identify and confront systems of power to reconstruct society in a vision of social justice.

The ushering in of the digital age has presented a host of unique challenges across a variety of fields, especially education. Concerned primarily with the intellectual, emotional, and moral development of human beings, education has been particularly affected by the proliferation of digital technologies as technology continues to alter human life in new, and often unforeseen ways. Because education is a fundamentally human endeavor, educational scholars and practitioners must contend with the ways in which technology is influencing the ontology of the human subject. What it means to know, to relate to others and oneself, to engage in dialogue, and even to come of age are all rapidly changing in light of ongoing changes in technology. Due to the increasing ubiquity of technology in our everyday lives, technology is often understood as a taken for granted and unavoidable aspect of modern human life. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in public education. As scholars such as Neil Postman (1992) have argued, the ubiquity of technology has

resulted in a dearth of normative debates surrounding the role it *ought* to play in our lives, causing education scholars and practitioners to view all technology as merely a set of neutral tools.

Despite ongoing claims that education is trapped in a bygone era resistant to innovation, educational practitioners, scholars, and policy makers have been enthusiastic about infusing technology into the everyday lives of children in schools. From the widely criticized Channel One (Molnar, 1996) (Attick, 2008), to the present app-ification of teaching through the use of online applications such as ClassDojo, Duolingo, Socrative, and EdModo, and the widespread implementation of Learning Management Systems (LMS) in higher education that provide platforms for online instruction, technology has been embraced at every level of the American educational process. Larry Cuban recognized this paradox as early as 1986 when he observed, "[f]ads, like changing dress hemlines and suit lapels, have entered and exited schools, yet these very same schools have been the targets of persistent criticism over their rigidity and resistance to reform" (Cuban, 1986, p. 5).

The recent technological restructuring of schools has served to intensify the neoliberal stranglehold on public school policy by allowing for unprecedented levels of accountancy, standardization, measurement, and surveillance. Despite this dramatic uptick in the presence of technology in schools—sometimes with technology subsuming school itself as in the case of cyber-schools or virtual schools (Miron & Gulosino, 2016)—little attention has been devoted to understanding how this constant exposure to technology is altering the way we learn and experience the world. Remaining absent from the dominant discourse surrounding technology and education are critical examinations of how modern technologies impact human subjectivity, the ways educators should address these changes, and how the influx of technology in education is the direct result of corporate influence, undermining the professional and intellectual autonomy of teachers, as well as exploiting captive markets.

While these are all examples of the ways in which discrete technologies have effects that reinforce systems of power, the Internet more broadly, and social media in particular are no exceptions. Due to the exceedingly far reaching usership of platforms like Facebook which, according to a recent study by Pew Research Center boasts approximately 1 billion users worldwide (Gramlich, 2018), issues of privacy, data mining, and even the spread of misinformation, have significant implications for the public domain. Furthermore, recent events such as the Equifax data breach of 2017 that compromised the personal information of over 145 million Americans (Halzack, 2014; Lieber, 2017), the alleged hacking of the Republican and Democratic National Committees by foreign entities during the last presidential election (Meyer, 2016), and the well-documented success of Russian "trolls" in manipulating social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to influence political discourse all underscore the fragility of the digital infrastructures most people now rely on, on a daily basis.

A core issue lying at the center of the question regarding the ways in which scholars engage in public digital scholarship is a question surrounding the role of social media in a democratic society. Specifically, we argue that the legitimacy of social media as part of the public sphere must be examined in order to consider the ways it might be utilized as teaching and learning tool that supports the project of digitally engaged scholarship. In what follows, we draw on the concept of "digital counterpublics" in order to explore if social media can indeed function as part of the public sphere in such a way that support the project of critical pedagogy.

Social Media and the Public Sphere

We argue that a central concern for scholars seeking to utilize online platforms for critically engaged work must be considerations surrounding the limitations of such platforms as sights of public engagement. As Jurgen Habermas notes in *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*, the public sphere "mediates between the private sphere and the sphere of public authority" (as cited in Hoskins, 2013, p. 3). He posits that it is "a discursive space where through the vehicle of public opinion puts the state in touch with the needs of society" (Habermas, 1991, p.#). The type of dynamic public life that Habermas envisioned as a necessary component of a vibrant democracy centers around sustained, embodied participation in public life.

While Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere offers a valuable framework for understanding life in a democratic society, scholars have rightfully shown that this theory does not fully capture the ways in which power is reified and contested in various enclaves of the public sphere. Most notably, Nancy Fraser (year) has challenged and expanded this notion of the public sphere through her concept of "subaltern counterpublics." Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theory of the "subaltern" (Spivak, 1988) and Rita Felski's concept of the "counterpublic" (Felski, 1989), Fraser argues that "subaltern counterpublics are formed as a result of the exclusions of the dominant publics and that their existence better promotes the ideal of participatory parity" (as cited in Kampourakis, 2016, p.1). In this way, subaltern public spheres support minoritized groups in carving out spaces to challenge hegemonic systems of power. Spaces such as barber shops, churches, or nightclubs catering to LGBTQ clientele are all examples of subaltern public spheres that have allowed for minoritized groups to contest dominant systems of power, and have indeed been sites of pivotal social organizing in modern history.

With the ushering in of the digital age, Fraser's concept of the subaltern public sphere has been further amended by scholars to include the ways in which digital platforms serve as sites of political participation. For example, online social media platforms can allow for "activists, dissidents, and insurgents who make use of subaltern public spheres to defy the mainstream discourses in the public sphere" (Lee, et. al., 2018, p. 1949-1950). As such, many scholars conceptualize social media platforms as essential avenues for political contestation. On this view, websites such as Twitter function as a vital part of the public sphere, akin to Habermas' "public square," where individuals and groups not only participate in public discourse, but do important counter-hegemonic work. Marc Lamont Hill (2018) refers to these online platforms as "digital counterpublics" (p. 286). As Hill (2018) argues, a digital counterpublic can refer "to any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities" (p. 286). Drawing on Fraser's notion of "subaltern counterpublics," where she points out the ways in which the traditional conceptualization of the public sphere a la Habermas fails to capture the ways in which minoritized groups work in various ways to contest hegemonic systems of power, and the example of the social media phenomenon "Black Twitter," Hill argues that Twitter functions as a key mechanism by which subaltern groups politically engage on issues vital to their communities, contest master narratives, and socially organize. As Casarae L. Gibson further explains, "Black Twitter" as a Twitter sub-audience "is part of the social media-sharing site Twitter whereby Black American communities across state and regional boundaries comment on the latest popular culture, politics, and social affairs" (as cited in Gibson, 2013, p. 74). Through the mobilization of hashtags, Twitter users can effectively create sub-communities concerned with various social issues. Indeed, Twitter has been an indispensable aspect of many recent social justice movements including #BlackLivesMatter, #Metoo and #RedforEd (Hawbaker, 2019). While we do not seek to discredit

the value of these and other social movements that have been made possible through digital platforms, we argue that social media are characterized by key elements that call into question their "public" nature, and consequently their vitality as a tool for critical pedagogy. Importantly, according to Fraser (1990), "[t]he public sphere in Habermas's sense is…conceptually distinct from the official-economy; it is not an arena of market relations, but rather one of discursive relations" (p.#). This key point, we suggest, raises concerns regarding the role of social media in the public sphere of a healthy democracy. Digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are deeply organized around systems of capital. In other words, social media is designed by capital to serve the interests of capital. While most, if not all, popular social media platforms are free to access with an Internet connection, the "users" are in fact the commodity of social media. Facebook's recent public entanglement with Cambridge Analytica revealed the startling reality of the exploitation of user data (Diaz, 2018). Furthermore, we suggest that spaces such as nightclubs, churches, and barbershops—all spaces that fit squarely into Fraser's definition of subaltern counterpublics—have traditionally been effective because they allow for evasive and subversive political organizing that importantly take place away from, and outside of, the dominant public eye. Social media platforms are—by design—characterized by, and extremely vulnerable to, surveillance and data-mining.

Further, as social media platforms are primarily concerned with customer satisfaction and not with promoting dialogue that contributes to a healthy democracy, sophisticated algorithms across all digital platforms ensure that users view content that they'll find relevant to their interests—mainly ideas, and advertisements, that align with their worldview. Creating what Eli Pariser (2011) calls "the filter bubble," such selective organizing of social media content results in hyper-polarized enclaves across digital platforms that impede, rather than promote, productive dialogue across groups.

Furthermore, a recent study on Twitter conducted by Demos, a bipartisan think-tank based in the United Kingdom found that this "echo chamber effect" figures most prominently among those "furthest from the political mainstream" (Cheshire, 2017, p. #). Therefore, while the notion that social media platforms can serve as digital counterpublics that allow for minoritized groups to carve out spaces for resistance, they simultaneously allow for the proliferation of misinformation and propaganda by those with antidemocratic goals. Such conditions call into question the usefulness of social media as a tool for engaging in critical pedagogy across digital platforms.

Indeed, as Judith Suissa (2016) notes, "ideas about what is educationally valuable and worthwhile cannot be detached from ideas about what forms of social and political organization are most morally defensible and desirable" (p. 771). Social media lacks key elements that contribute to a healthy intellectual environment and the sustained, embodied organizing that makes social movements successful. Deborah Meier, for instance, has argued that educative spaces have worked best "when they model the best practices of civic and intellectual life, with small classrooms serving as settings for safe but searching and honest debates" (as cited in Klinenberg, 2018, p. 87). Social media platforms, through the ways in which they contribute to the obfuscation of reality and the intentional bifurcation of groups based on their search history and previous "likes" does not promote educative experiences. If the project of education and the work of educators is, as we argue, done *in* and *for* the health of our democracy in the public sphere, we argue that the value of social media as a pedagogical tool must be re-examined. In fact, we might argue that social media in many ways contributes to the type of social isolation that makes authentic social infrastructure less robust.

As Eric Klinenberg (2018) notes, "[a]s meaningful as the friendships we establish online can be, most of us are unsatisfied with virtual ties that never develop into face-to-face relationships.

Building real connections requires a shared physical environment—a social infrastructure" (p. 42). Public schools, as a vital "palace for the people," to use Klinenberg's language, have the potential to support the project of democracy by bringing together heterogenous groups to engage on relevant topics. This is not to suggest that public schools always function as idyllic spaces committed to democratic values. To the contrary, the colonizing effects of public schools and their contribution to social inequality is the premise on which critical pedagogy was founded.

Social media do, to an extent, promote a diversity of subaltern voices that may otherwise have not had a platform, elevating the possibilities for Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual." Gramsci (1971) notes, "[a]ll men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (p. 115). Social media platforms do allow for those not backed by institutions to engage in political discourse to a degree, however a user's influence is still greatly tempered by the ability of the individual to leverage the capital of social media, such as hashtags, in order to gain an "audience."

Additionally, emerging research suggests that an increasing number of accounts across various social media platforms are not operated by humans at all but by "autonomous entities" known as "social bots" (Varol, et. al. 2017). These social bots, which are social media accounts controlled algorithimically by software, can serve useful purposes such as automatically distributing information at timed intervals. Increasingly, however, social bots are being utilized to "emulate human behavior to manufacture fake grassroots political support, promote terrorist propaganda and recruitment, manipulate the stock market, and disseminate rumors and conspiracy theories" (Varol, et. al., 2017, p.#). Recent estimates conclude that approximately 15% of all Twitter accounts are in fact social bots (Varol, et. al. 2017). The pollution of social media platforms with malicious software aimed at purposefully deceieving human users further complicates the Internet landscape by capitalizing on and manipulating sites' algorithims in order to attact more "likes," "shares," and "views" in order to spread false and even dangerous content. The proliferation of social bots casts further doubt on the integrity of social media platforms as sites of democratic participation. Furthermore, it displays the ways in which social media still organize around the principles of capital and are ultimately proprietary, therefore potentially limiting their ability to support radical liberatory projects.

For example, the notion that technology can support democratic social movements is widely accepted and infrequently challenged. While there are examples of technology like social media platforms being utilized for political organizing such as the role technology played in protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, Arab Spring, and even Occupy Wall Street, the limitation of technology as a liberatory tool lies in the logical conclusion of techno-rationality: the elimination of what makes us human (Brown, Guskin, & Mitchell, 2012; Ngak, 2011). While there is evidence that social media can play a role in the initial organizing of social movements, there are also indications that its impact is fleeting, because social movements require sustained, bodily presence, and a degree of risk. As Emily Dreyfuss (2017) notes with regard to protests surrounding the Dakota Access Pipleline, "[i]f social media enabled the Standing Rock Sioux to amplify their protest, its speed and ceaseless flow also allowed the world to forget about them" (p.#). In other words, on platforms like Facebook and Twitter that are predicated on what is "trending," social movements themselves become passing trends. Criticism regarding the superficiality of online "activism" has even garnered this phenomenon its own word—slacktivism (Jones, 2016). Nolan Cabrera, Cheryl Matias, and Roberto Montoya define "slacktivism" as "an online form of self-aggrandizing, politically ineffective activism" (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017, p.#). Henrik Serup Christensen (2011) has referred to online slacktivism as "political activities that have no

impact on real-life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants" (p.1). This is not to suggest that *all* online engagement by scholars fits this definition of "slacktivism," however, we will explore the possibilities and limitations of this form of scholarly work. While gaining awareness of social issues through online platforms may be an acceptable starting point for cultivating praxis, or "action and reflection upon the world in order to change it," it is doubtful that re-posting news articles with their accompanying hashtags or Tweeting is sufficient to reach the critical transitivity advanced by critical pedagogues (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Furthermore, we argue online interactions neutralize the corporeal presence of gender, race, and sexuality, among other identities that are integral to fostering dialogue that supports the process of critical inquiry and humanization. However, the neutralization of marginalized identities on online platforms often serves to reify hegemonic structures of power and privilege. Here, we do not mean to suggest that such limitations of the online format cannot be overcome, but instead suggest that the value of social media platforms as democratizing spaces must be approached with caution. By turning next to several key tenets of critical pedagogy, specifically dialogue and humanization, we argue that online platforms meaningfully compromise our ability as critical pedagogues to engage in the type of problem posing on social media that is required to bridge understanding and elevate critical consciousness.

Critical Pedagogy and Social Media

Although critical pedagogy has been the object of ongoing critique (Ellsworth, 1989), it remains a vibrant tradition for scholars and educators seeking social change. With intellectual roots in social reconstructionism, "[c]ritical pedagogy is an educational philosophy that chooses to work for change" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 100). The notion of radical humanization—both of oneself and others—through authentic dialogue lies at the heart of critical pedagogy.

While critical pedagogy is not a monolithic tradition, there is little disagreement surrounding the role of dialogue in promoting the realization of critical transitivity that supports radical action. As explained by Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (2003):

> The principle of dialogue as best defined by Freire is one of the most significant aspects of critical pedagogy. It speaks to an emancipatory educational process that is above all committed to the empowerment of students through challenging the dominant educational discourse and illuminating the right and freedom of students to become subjects of their world. (p. 15)

For Freire, dialogue is necessary for students and teachers in reaching a deeper understanding of the oppressive forces that shape social relations, or *conscientization* (Freire, 1998). Conscientization, defined by Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003) as "the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to re-create them," requires an ongoing process of human interaction and contestation (p. 15). Technology, through its infiltration into nearly every aspect of our daily lives is itself a system that shapes students' lives and limits, defines, or restructures the possibilities they imagine for affecting change on their surroundings. Because it has become the central medium of communication, technology has come to redefine how we negotiate meaning with one another. The more we use technology to engage with one another, the greater the challenge for critical pedagogues in fostering authentic dialogue. As bell hooks (1994) notes, "[t]o engage in dialogue

is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences" (p. 130). However, technologically mediated interactions undermine authentic dialogue through its dehumanizing effects. One indicator that such interactions result in the objectification of others is the proliferation of online bullying, particularly among young people. Online bullying can take many forms. According to Rachel Lohmann (2010), cyberbullying can be defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computer, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (para. 3). Lohman (2010) argues, "cyberbullying is an easier way to bully because it doesn't involve face to face interaction" (para. 5). A recent study reveals that 70% of students report seeing instances of online bullying frequently. Additionally, 81% of young people believe that cyberbullying is easier to perpetrate than face to face bullying. Cyberbullying and Internet trolling are made possible due largely to the ways social media *dehumanize* our interactions. Sherry Turkle (2015) argues that in the absence of a "physical presence to exert a modulating force," (p. 262) these dehumanizing interactions are made easier. Interestingly, Freire notes that, "[t]o deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people" (Freire, 1998, p. 50). A "world without people" might be currently unimaginable, but technology and social media certainly allow us to move in and out of dialogic spaces where the human element is muted. While cyberbullying might be an extreme example, it underscores the dehumanizing potential of online interactions and therefore warrants scrutiny for those working in the tradition of critical pedagogy.

The more students and teachers grow accustomed to technologically-mediated social relations, the greater the demand on those working in the tradition of critical pedagogy to explore the effects technology has on the ability of educators to foster authentic dialogue and student agency. For example, with the proliferation of social media our students, particularly at the university level, spend more time engaging in asynchronous, technologically mediated "conversations" than ever before. The often uncritical "sharing" of news articles without regard to validity or authenticity, as well as the ways in which sites like Facebook tailor news based on users' previous "likes" contributes to dialogic echo-chambers where users are more likely to be exposed only to content that reflects their own beliefs (Pariser, 2011). In the concluding section, we want to examine some specific cases that we believe illustrate more clearly some of the inherent limitations of social media in terms of public discourse and educational scholarship.

Social Media and Public Spaces: Illustrations and Implications for Digital Scholarship

Imagine yourself in an ideal public square, where people are openly discussing issues of relevance to their respective communities, exchanging ideas about how to improve those communities and address issues that affect them all, attempting in good faith to convince others to see their points of view, genuinely listening to the points of view of others, and so on. In such a setting, genuinely educational experiences can take place, worldviews can be expanded, and alliances forged, though of course none of these are guaranteed. Now further imagine that some unknown percentage of the people that you interact with are, in reality, automatons with pre-programmed scripts and modes of engagement, unable to authentically respond to or even hear you or anyone else. Imagine that some other unknown percentage of people that you interact with are paid by third parties to engage you on specific topics of conversation so as to change your behavior in other areas of your life. A third unknown percentage of people in this public square are actually taking covert surveys designed as conversations, the results of which they will later sell or use for their own purposes. Other groups are simply listening to the conversations of the discussants and

collecting data on what is being discussed, by whom, and with whom. Some individuals are there to keep tabs on others, and to track specific topics of discussion that have been deemed by other third parties to be undesirable or dangerous. Many of the loudest actors in this square are simply avatars for large corporations and other moneyed interests, and they are given various means of amplifying their own voices and chosen topics of discussion. Finally, imagine that the entire public square is governed by an invisible set of rules that dictate how likely you are to encounter another given individual, set the bounds for what is acceptable to discuss and what is not, and even render entire groups of individuals nearly invisible to you because they have been deemed irrelevant based on your own past history of conversations and interactions, all of which have been collected and stored by the public square. Additionally, everyone in the square has the ability to make it such that they never have to interact with or even see other individuals with whom they disagree or who they simply do not like.

We do not feel that we are significantly exaggerating when we say that the situation just described is relevantly analogous to the one that individuals find themselves in when they are engaged on social media.[1] While a space like the one we have just described might not render it entirely impossible to have genuinely educative and important sociopolitical discussions, it is difficult to see why anyone, particularly educators who are interested in authentic and open dialogue, would affirmatively choose or defend this arena as a worthwhile one in which to attempt those types of conversations. And though it is critical that we as scholars interrogate concepts such as authenticity and dialogue, we submit that it is difficult to conceptualize any plausible definitions of those terms whatsoever that would make our hypothetical public square amenable to their actualization. When we take into account the commitments of critical pedagogy discussed above, it seems to us that the social media space at best makes genuine dialogue incredibly difficulty and at worst makes it unthinkable. The structure of the space of social media is entirely unlike the more traditional public spheres discussed earlier, and attempts to draw analogies, direct or indirect, between social media spaces and a church or bar are fundamentally misguided.

Perhaps no recent episode has more clearly illustrated the fundamental stakes of academics attempting to change hearts and minds via online dialogue than the social media saga of far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. While detailing the history and rise of Jones, a notorious conspiracy theorist and racist, would take us much too far afield here, what is notable is that his ultimate banning from virtually all important social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube) was in many quarters hailed as a victory for public discourse, a sign, however, small, that social media could to at least some degree self-regulate, and naturally filter out the most corrosive and detrimental political actors and messages (Nicas, 2018). It is tempting, particularly for academics and leftists who would attempt to utilize social media for the purpose of genuinely affecting the political realities of contemporary American society, to view this development in those terms. That is, to conceptualize the banning of Jones as in some sense progress (or at least hope) for online discourse via social media. In a perverse way, Jones provided hope for leftists on two fronts, first because his banning could be viewed through this hopeful lens as healthy for the future of online "public" discourse, and second because he was able to assert such a demonstrably large political influence both on individual people as well as the American political milieu in general. The thought here roughly is that "if he can do it, why can't we?" In this sense, the Jones affair is illustrative in multiple ways of two of the great hopes for left-academic engagement on social media.

To our minds, the major version of the academic leftist argument for engagement through social media that the Jones affair taps into is the idea that social media is in some sense a truly (or

1. Indeed, we have oversimplified significantly in some ways, leaving out the fact, for example, that the entire public square in the analogy would also be privately owned and driven by a profit motive.

at least imperfectly) democratic public sphere, where there is or can be a genuinely open exchange of ideas, and that it is our responsibility as public intellectuals to engage in this new public sphere, with the ultimate goal of effecting leftist political and social change. There are numerous studies that look at the emergence of publics and political movements across various sociopolitical contexts, and many of them take the ultimately sanguine view that social media either already is or could become a nearly ideal expression of the Habermasian vision of the public sphere (Choi & Cho, 2017; Hoskins, 2013; Shirky, 2011). We contend that this view of social media is reliant on deeply flawed assumptions about the form and structure of social media itself, and that, as currently constituted, social media platforms hold little promise for effective leftist discourse and political development, perhaps particularly when that discourse originates from academics.

With respect to the argument that social media platforms are in at least some minimal sense inherently public, and therefore pregnant with liberatory potential, we argue that this conceptualization of the issue both fundamentally misinterprets the basic structure of social media as well as the driving motivations of those who exert control over those platforms. It is in some sense definitional that all major social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and so on are not public in any traditional sense, being entirely privately owned and run as corporate entities. While this may initially seem like a minor point, it reveals a number of more serious underlying issues when it comes to considering the possibilities of public discourse on these platforms. For example, while there are certainly cases of social media platforms seeming to purge malignant actors from their spheres of discourse, such as the example of Alex Jones (it is, we should note, an open question whether or not this would even be a feature of a truly public space of discourse) it is critical to note that the mechanisms by which this discursive filtering is accomplished are generally entirely automated and are as likely to "accidentally" catch entirely innocent and honest interlocutors in their digital nets.

Another recent illustrative example of this process was the so-called "adpocalypse" that descended on Youtube content creators in late 2017. In what would turn out to be a precursor to the banning of Alex Jones from YouTube, the platform undertook a large-scale recalibration of its advertising algorithm. This was done, in large part, to appease advertisers who were unhappy with their products being advertised before or within videos that contained hateful imagery or speech (the main target were groups of explicitly racist and neo-nazi channels that had had major advertiser's products inadvertently displayed at beginnings of their videos). The monetization of YouTube content is a large topic, but the for our purposes what is important is that advertising dollars, which are correlated to the number of views a given video receives, are an important source of revenue for content creators on the platform, and enable smaller channels to continue producing videos and gain wider audiences. This is not something that is controlled by an individual or even a group of individuals who work for YouTube. Rather, advertisements are assigned to videos based on algorithms that track the typical audience, number of viewers, and the like for specific channels and types of videos. For example, a popular fitness YouTuber is more likely to have advertisements for shoes or nutritional supplements appear on their videos than a popular political channel. This is an entirely automated process, and until recently was one that largely operated in the background and served to provide supplementary income for YouTube content creators. However, once the algorithm was adjusted so as to deny advertising revenue to channels that proffered hate-speech or bigoted symbology (e.g. swastikas, hoods, etc.) a number of interesting side-effects developed, examples that serve to illustrate the actual goals of social media, as well as the inherent barriers to genuine discourse that are built into their business models. While the adjusted algorithm did indeed cut traffic and revenue for the explicitly racist and bigoted channels, it also caught up entirely unrelated channels in the net (Dunphy, 2017). For example, a popular leftist political podcast, *The*

Majority Report, had its advertising revenue entirely cut off for months because of videos that they had done exposing and critiquing far right internet personalities. While the intention of these videos was to demonstrate the inconsistencies and absurdity in the objects of their critique, the algorithm, which is inherently incapable of detecting things like sarcasm or parody, only recognized certain key terms and symbols (e.g. "nazi" or "white power") and tagged the videos are hate-speech, and marked the entire channel as "not advertiser friendly." This resulted in a number of leftist channels having to shutter completely, and others coming very near to having to do the same. The only survivors were channels that had built up an independent network of private supporters or outside sources of funding, and the policy ultimately affected as many antiracist and antifascists channels as it did explicitly racist and fascist ones (Grind & McKinnon, 2019).

The point of these examples is not that this or that specific content creator was affected, but what this case tells us about why social media platforms behave in the ways that they do. What drove YouTube to alter its advertising algorithm, and what ultimately drove Twitter and Facebook to ban Alex Jones, was that the presence of these controversial figures and ideas on their platforms had become more financial trouble than they were worth. YouTube did not ban or remove explicitly racist or bigoted content before their large advertisers complained about that content because that content generated views, clicks, and ultimately dollars for the platform, and Twitter behaved similarly with Alex Jones. Being private corporations, the fundamental imperative of which is to maximize profit at all costs, social media platforms have no incentive whatsoever to encourage or discourage any specific type of discourse or content so long as their bottom lines are not affected. It was at the exact moment, and only at that moment, when Alex Jones became a financial liability rather than an asset that he was removed from these platforms. Social media is neither biased toward liberatory discourse or toward right-wing bigotry, but only toward generating profits for its owners. It is in the interest of social media companies to court controversy to generate clicks and traffic precisely up to the point when it becomes toxic to their brand identity. As Google CEO Eric Schmidt once remarked, "[t]he ideal is to get right up to the creepy line and not cross it" (Naughton, 2017). To echo the point made above, these platforms are not simply neutral tools to be used on equal footing by various parties in the grand war of ideas, but rather specifically designed and tailored profit centers which are meant to generate wealth for the small group of individuals that have ownership stakes in them. Rather than being public squares, these are highly regulated private domains built for capitalists by capitalists. Indeed, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey recently inadvertently made this exact point, during an interview regarding the company's approach to political speech and censorship. After denying any inherent bias toward or against any particular, Dorsey claims that "So the main thing that we're focused on is how we stay transparent with our actions and continue to be impartial – *not neutral, but impartial*" (as cited in Feinberg, 2019, p. #). What Dorsey is, perhaps subconsciously, revealing here is that the first commitment of social media platforms is not to any ideal of openness, publicity, or discourse, but rather to their own proprietary algorithms and the false image of impartiality that those algorithms afford them.

The question that we as critical pedagogues need to ask ourselves is whether or not public discourse should be governed by algorithms at all. Once again, the issue at stake here is not one of critical educators and academics taking cues from the right over how to engage in the arena of social media, but rather about whether or not a medium that has the particular features of current social media platforms (i.e. impersonality, a profit motive, a preponderance of bad faith actors, a bias toward ideological bubble creation, etc.) can ever truly be thought of as a public square in the ways that matter. That is, given the way social media platforms are structured, the demonstrable

ways that they have behaved when it comes to addressing political speech, and their inherent motivations, it seems that there is little reason to think that critical educators can our ought to look to these platforms as areas of genuine liberatory discourse.

Conclusion

Our goal in this discussion has not been to argue that social media platforms can never in any circumstance support genuinely educative discursive engagements. Of course, even in circumstances not conducive to connection and education, people will find ways to make due. Rather, what we hope to have shown is that these platforms are at the very least structurally and conceptually hostile toward those types of engagements, and make authentic dialogue much more difficult than it ought to be, and indeed than it is in other embodied contexts.

Ultimately, it seems to us that much of the motivation behind calls for academics to engage politically or otherwise via social media boils down to a kind of techno-fatalism about our world and the way things are in it. Social media is seen as the inevitable future of political discourse and its asynchronous, disembodied structures are already making direct inroads into education. While we acknowledge that educators and academics must respond to the changing socio-cultural contexts in which they operate, and that ignoring potential tools at our disposal in our large-scale educative and political projects is an intellectual and political mistake, we also argue that these tools must be evaluated soberly and critically. If social media is indeed the inevitable future of education and discourse, we must at least enter that future with a clear-eyed view of the structural and philosophical limitations that exist in those spaces. It is to that goal that we hope to have contributed here.

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