Should we have representation at Facebook?

Should there be direct democratic oversight over Facebook? And why has there been limited discussion about direct democracy within Facebook (Meta)? These two questions frame this short paper. I intend to explore these questions by drawing on two authors: Matthew Flisfeder and Mark Fisher. To answer the first the question, I draw on Flisfeder’s argument that social media is a structuring metaphor for our reality. Flisfeder takes a radical interpretation of social media and suggest that it is the most dominant ideological force in our time. For Flisfeder, social media can help explain our relationship with desires, subjectivity, social relations. In essence, social media can help explain our relationship with reality (not solely nor totally).

To answer the second question, I will utilize Fisher’s argument of “capitalism realism”. In essence, Fisher argues that we have reached a stage in our cultural, psyche, conscious development that we find it impossible (or at least difficult) to envision a world without capitalism. Moreover, solutions to proposed democratic/capitalistic problems still repeat the same capitalistic logic. For an example of this “capitalism realism”, I will highlight “The Real Facebook Oversight Board” (RFOB). The RFOB was created in response to Facebook’s own independent board, and a check on the undemocratic influence of Facebook. Even though the RFOB has nobler aims, I hope to show that the RFOB is still repeating a capitalist logic. The RFOB is better than Facebook’s own board, but the goal of these solutions should be to change the logic from a capitalistic one to a more democratic one.

In the final section, I will offer a brief analysis of the EU’s Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act (DSA). Although, the DSA is a useful proposal and a useful first step, it does not go far enough and does not offer sufficient democratic representation within Facebook (and larger platforms). This analysis will document the importance of taking an expansive picture of seeing the totality and metaphors in action, and the DSA does not go far enough in offering representation for individuals. After the DSA has been critiqued, I will of the “People’s Council” (PC) as a method for improving the DSA and as a mechanism to cause radical change.

Combining the work of Flisfeder and Fisher, I hope to articulate the role of social media in our subjectivity in a neoliberal totality; from this base, I argue this gives citizens a justification to have direct representation (PC) within social media: simply put, social media impacts our reality to such an extent that it justifies direct democratic influence. Finally, I will draw on two direct examples, the RFOB and the EU’s Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act to highlight Fisher’s “capitalism realism” that solutions offered to the problems of social media, capitalism and democratic issues, do not go far enough in changing people’s relationship with the metaphor and totality.

**Section 1: Matthew Flisfeder’s Social media *is* *Our Ideology***

In Flisfeder’s new text, *Algorithmic Desire*, he puts forth an argument that social media can become “our central metaphor for the present totality” (Flisfeder 2021: 12). Totality, in a few words, can be a sort of “cognitive mapping” (to use Frederic Jameson’s terminology) for a society to understand the world. However, a totality is not a smooth operation, it is filled with antagonism, contradictions and complex experiences that create an objective reality:

“A totality is like a hyperobject in the sense that it allows us to contemplate the entire scenario of the present, but insofar as it is split and traversed by human social antagonisms. Again, as Luckács explains, objective reality is in its immediacy the same for both the proletariat and the bourgeois; however, objective reality remains split by the antagonism that give rise to their diverging consciousness and experiences.”(Flisfeder 2021: 12)

To articulate simply, a totality is to take an expansive picture of a society and to argue from a structuralist perspective combined with the complexity of individual’s own complex relationship with reality, one can begin to explain individual’s subjectivity in relation to the totality (in essence, how they acquired their understanding of reality).

To help explain the totality, Flisfeder articulates the Lacanian Metaphor: “It helps to solidify and to make sense of a number of related phenomena that, without the metaphor, lack body and contextualization. The metaphor helps to formalize the totality, to make it comprehensible. In doing so, it provides a platform upon which we may act within the coordinates of the dominant consciousness” (Flisfeder 2021: 12). The metaphor is how we come to understand one’s relationship with the current makeup of reality. For a simplistic example, individuals living under the totality of capitalism will be split into the metaphor of bourgeois or proletariat (from a simplistic Marxian view). The groups bourgeois and proletariat are metaphors to help understand individuals’ relationship to the political economy (totality) of capitalism. From the description of the metaphoric relationship to the totality comes prescriptions, actions, ideas and subjectivity that individuals express.

Thus, to combine the two ideas: the totality is the objective reality that a present society is functioning under; while the metaphor(s) is the diverse expression of the totality, in all its contradictions, messiness and complexity, that gives the totality a form of comprehension. For a visual example, one can think of fractural architecture as an example of totality and metaphor (Spencer 2015: 79). As already mentioned, Flisfeder is arguing that social media can be one of the structuring metaphors for our totality; further, he claims that “social media teaches us about the dominant form of *ideology* (and thus the dominant consciousness) in contemporary, twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism. Social media is our metaphor – it *is* our ideology” (Flisfeder 2021: 12). Flisfeder argues that social media is influencing democracy, enjoyment, ideology, subjectivity and our consciousness to a algorithmic logic (Flisfeder 2021: 12). Social media, according to Flisfeder, is such a force that it impacts our own subjectivity, desires, and enjoyment; crucial aspects of what an individual is can be derived from social media

Using this premise, that social media is the dominant metaphor, I am arguing that this justifies a form of direct democratic representation, a PC (will be developed further on in the paper), that needs to be built into the internal structures of Facebook. To summarize, the two points of my argument can be boiled down to: social media (Facebook) wields such an ideological, subjectivised role in today’s age that it demands a PC, so it can act as a democratic check on Facebook, and (similar to a democratic society) people should have a say over the structural reality that they live in.

There have been a number of demands and proposals for various forms of governmental regulations and oversight over social media. These have included changing social media into a public service and breaking up social media giants. One recent example of legislation (will be explored later) is the EU’s new Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act, which offers improvements and is a as a useful check on the influence of social media. However, the DSA and other forms of legislation rarely calls for direct democratic representation/oversight within social media companies. Why is that? One reason, I would argue, is that individuals advocating radical solutions are still reproducing the dominant capitalist logic and are therefore constrained by that logic. To demonstrate my point, I will first explain Mark Fisher’s argument of “Capitalist Realist” and then examine the limitations of the “Real Facebook Oversight Board” (RFOB)

**Section 2: Fisher’s “Capitalist Realist”**

Fisher’s argument of “Capitalist Realist” can be succinctly summarized:

“we are inevitably reminded of the phrase… it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by “capitalist realism”: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political economy and economic system, but also it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.” (Fisher 2009: 2).

Fisher often appeals to pop culture and pop music to flesh his argument (Fisher 2014: 7-8). He articulates a thought experiment between music from 1995 onwards (till 2014, time of publication) and suggest that music has not radically changed; however, “play a jungle record from 1993 to someone in 1989 and it would have sounded like something so new that it would have challenged them to rethink what music was, or could be.” (Fisher 2014: 8). This inability, since 1995, has led to a “cancellation of the future”, inability to envision a new horizon, a new culture. Fisher suggests this “cancellation of the future” is a side-effect of neoliberal policies: “Despite all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new” (Fisher 2014: 15).

Fisher argues that post-war Britain’s higher maintenance grants acted as indirect funding for experimental music during the 1960s and 1980s (Fisher 2014: 15). In essence, it gave spaces for experimental music to articulate itself into something that needed not be immediate. However, public service broadcasting became privatized, which meant, according to Fisher, cultural production started to demand instant success, which meant: “the social time available from withdrawing from work and immersing oneself in cultural production drastically declined” (Fisher 2014: 15). Further, Fisher argues the cost of rent and mortgages as the greatest factor in this loss of future. “Since then [70s & 80s], the decline on social housing, the attacks on squatting, and the delirious rise in property prices have meant that the amount of time and energy available for cultural production has massively diminished” (Fisher 2014: 15-16).

The loss of future, or different conceivable alternatives is what persists in today’s age: “Capitalist realism… is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher 2009: 16). In other words, we have reached a stage in capitalism that individuals are “capitalist realist”, which means we can only conceive of capitalist solutions. As “capitalist realist”, our ideas, praxis, meditation, solutions, and cultural expression as to what a society should and can be like is fixed by this capitalist realist psyche.

I want to deploy this “capitalist realists” argument in political sense. This is my reasoning as to why there has been limited discussion of direct democracy within Facebook; we are stuck in a “capitalist realist” mindset that it is difficult of conceiving direct democratic representation within social media. To highlight the logic of my argument, I want to critique The RFOB in order to demonstrate that it is still reproducing a capitalistic logic by comparing it with Facebook’s own board. Further, I will offer a brief application of this idea to The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act (DSA), and that even useful acts like the DSA the key should be changing user’s relationship with the totality and the metaphor to enable a possibility for change.

**The Real Facebook Oversight Board**

In a press statement, Shoshanna Zuboff said the RFOB “came together for one purpose, we demand comprehensive action to ensure that Facebook cannot be weaponised to undermine the vote and with-it American democracy” (TV 2020). Whereas in comparison to Facebook’s own oversight board, Facebook’s board aim is: “to promote free expression by making principled, independent decisions regarding content on Facebook and Instagram and by issuing recommendations on the relevant Facebook Company Content Policy… it will review a selected number of highly emblematic cases and determine if decisions were made in accordance with Facebook's stated values and policies.” ('Oversight Board - Ensuring respect for free expression, through independent judgement.'). Although the aims of the RFOB are nobler than Facebook’s own board, the structural logic of both are boards are similar.

Both boards are highly elitist (both contain former world leaders; Toomas Hendrik, former president of Estonia is a member of RFOB and Helle Thorning-Schmidt Former Prime Minister, Denmark is a member of Facebook’s own board, members of government and elite professors; Larry Tribe, Harvard University Constitutional Law Prof is a member of RFOB and Michael McConnell Professor and Director of the Constitutional Law Centre, Stanford Law School is a member of Facebook’s own board). Though the RFOB does not pay its members, which would appear to be more egalitarian, this policy excludes lower income people who do not have the time or the resources to participates on the RFOB. Both boards are keen to ensure a diverse group of members. For example, Facebook’s own board seeks to “include members from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the Facebook community itself” ('Oversight Board - Ensuring respect for free expression, through independent judgement.') and RFOB’s includes the president of Colours for Change, Rashad Robinson, and the founder of Digital Sisters, Shireen Mitchell and the President of the NAACP, Derrick Johnson ('Oversight Board - Ensuring respect for free expression, through independent judgement.'). To be clear, not all the logic is bad. For example, having a diverse range on a specific topic is a good thing; yet, when the RFOB is attempting to be a solution to Facebook’s board having such similar logic, is problematic.

This is Fisher’s point: even when one is suggesting a solution to a capitalist or democratic problem, we are still operating under a capitalist rubric. Viewing the RFOB from this perspective, it brings to light systemic problems with our thinking and creativity. Whether or not the RFOB has any actual influence over Facebook’s actual policy is irrelevant in this case; the greater point of this essay is to highlight our creative limitations.

**The Digital Services Act package.**

The Digital Services Act (DSA) package combines two acts, The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act. The three key goals of the DSA are “Better protect consumers and their fundamental rights online. Establish a powerful transparency and a clear accountability framework for online platforms. Foster innovation, growth and competitiveness within the single market”('The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment' 2022) (The DSA deals with varying degrees of digital services; however, I will focus my attention to the “very large online platform”, which are classified in such a way if they have over “10% of 450 million consumers in Europe.” ('The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment' 2022). I will also focus on one particular element expressed within the Act: that very large platforms have to be regulated by members states. As mentioned, from a large platform perspective, they now will be supervised by “Oversight structure to match the complexity of the online space: Member States will have the primary role, supported by a new European Board for Digital Services; for very large platforms, supervision and enforcement by the Commission.” ('Europe fit for the Digital Age: new online rules for platforms'). Within this Act, each specific member state has to “appoint a Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) to enforce the DSA” ('European Commission proposes impactful reform of rules for digital platforms'). In essence, this DSC has the power of enforcement. For instance, the DSC has the power to levy fines and on-site inspections (and more), and users will be able to lodge complaints to the DSC. This development is an exciting prospect of holding these large platforms accountable and is a useful first step. However, I would argue the DSC and DSA does not go far enough for users.

Social media users still would not have enough of a say in the functions of these very large platforms. The logic of this bill is vertical and elitist: member states appoint individuals to act as the DSC. Users do indeed have the capacity to engage with the DSC. However, when taking in a broader viewpoint, the proposal is not enough. The logic I am appealing to is to view the DSA from a Flisfeder’s totality and metaphoric sense. The DSA does not go far enough in changing our creativity, our imagination, to envision a different alternative. This is why a PC is a more substantial change; I would argue, it potentially offers a re-conception of our understanding/relationship to a global industry (social media), and it allows individuals to participate and dictate an industry that impacts their daily lives. Within the DSA, the change is not enough.

**The “People’s Council”**

The PC would be a specific institution that would be legally enforced, and in order for “Very Large” platforms to operate they must ensure that a PC exists. For a simplified version, the PC would be a group of elected representatives who would represent social media users. The PC would have 15-33% share of representational influence over these “Very Large” platforms. Admittedly, this is an abstract concept as of right now; but the abstractness is intentional. A more detailed version of a PC should be left up to member states to discuss. In my view, should each member state decide on its own formation of a PC, or does there need to be a unified expression of the PC that all member states have to strictly follow. However, this question is beyond the scope of the paper. The main point is there needs to be some form of (directly) elected representation within these “Very Large” platforms, and that they have legitimate legal enforcement to not be toothless, and that they have enough representation within the companies to not be by-passed.

A PC is not without its problems. For instance, is direct democratic oversight over Facebook (social media) politically viable? Could the PC become a dangerous tool for Zuckerberg/Musk to use as a form of democratic legitimacy for Facebook’s/Twitter’s goals? Would we want average citizens will the ability to influence Facebook? Would political fatigue not be a factor for individuals? Would a PC exclude users who do not have the time to dedicate themselves to a PC? Given space limitations, I will only address the first three questions.

The first question, I would argue one could make a reasonable case that this would appeal to people across the political spectrum. In particularly with the hegemonic weight that democracy has within our western world, offering a form of democratic representation within a corporation such as Facebook would be appealing to democratic politics. Furthermore, in my opinion, due to the influence of social media on individual’s lives, I would argue this no longer becomes a political justification, it becomes a political necessity.

The second concern (Musk and Zuckerberg) is an interesting one that would need careful consideration. However, I do believe there could be legitimate forms of checking the ability of the PC, and certainty, the PC is not meant to be the be-all-end-all of the decision-making process. For instance, EU member states still can play a role and they can all act as checks on one another. However, this may be an unavoidable danger. But this happens in all political systems. For instance, the three branches of the US government are designed to be a check on one another. However, if the Executive holds a majority in the Judicial and a super majority in both Houses of Congress, then the checks are potentially useless. So, the point being, in other democratic systems there are ways of abuse.

The Third question is a more salient question. Given recent events (Brexit and Trump), does this demand for greater involvement of the average citizen become problematic with the rise of populism? Despite the threats of populist impulses, there is a greater chance of radical, democratic solutions with a structurally more democratic PC than what the RFOB can offer, and it goes further than the DSA. A PC is a democratic, serious option that treats individuals seriously, and gives people a say over social media, whilst offering a creativity change to our relationship to social media.

Combining a Flisfeder’s perspective with a Fisher’s approach, gives us a novel justification for arguing for representation within Facebook itself; while at the same time, highlighting the limitations of our creativity to conceive of new solutions. Examining the limitations of the RFOB and its structural similarity to Facebook’s oversight board exposes a lack of creativity and forces us to be more critical and braver with our solutions to democracy and social media oversight.

**Conclusion**

The first aim of this paper has been to justify greater democratic oversight and representation within Facebook. The justification, simply put, is that social media plays a unique role in our understanding with reality that it justifies political representation within these large platforms. Also, the larger aim and slightly more complex aim is to illuminate the limitation of our solutions, even from our most sophisticated thinkers in our time. In some respects, my solution, the PC is not only political and social change, but a change in our creativity.

The PC functions and structures have been intentionally vague. They have been left vague because the structures and the makeup should be left for more discussion and debate. Ideas such as citizens assemblies, a lottery-based PC, turning Facebook into a co-operative (to list a few) are legitimate and useful options that expand our vision. And this is the real aim of the PC, it is a chance or an experiment in a unique way to act as a new form of democratic representation within our digital age.

Some clear benefits could arise from a PC. For instance, the people would have the ability of redress. In fairness, the DSC allows users to lodge complements, also. However, having a PC goes further in its structure, plus the DSC is influenced by the members states, not directly by individuals/users like the PC would be. A PC in Facebook would provide an institutional point for people to channel their redress, and channel it effectively; the PC becomes a functional tool for organizations, non-profits, associations, and, most importantly, individuals to rally towards, and effectively influence social media in a manner that can be closer to a democratic function.

However, precisely like the problems of the RFOB, we need to be careful with our own solutions, even if they contain nobler aims, (for example, RFOB’s attempt to limit the unjust democratic influence of Facebook) that we are not reproducing a logic similar to dominant capitalist institutions. Furthermore, the PC highlights the necessity of taking a larger scale view on influencing a radical change. Taking people’s relationship within a totality and metaphor into account is an important point to press for social change, which the DSA does not. The DSA is a useful and progressive step in curtailing some of the harms of social media companies. However, the EU being in a firm position within its member state and having a strong bloc both values wise and (arguably) more importantly economically, it can bend larger platforms to their demands better than what an individual states can do, such as when Facebook took on Australia and won. Having this presence, I would argue puts the EU in precise position to enact something like the PC.

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