

Greater Good Gathering

Speaker
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The Greater Good Gathering held on February 6–7, 2019 explored the future of public policy and how best to advance the greater good in the 21st century in light of technological innovation, economic disruption, ideological polarization, and governance challenges. Event co-sponsors included Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia Law School, Union Theological Seminary, The Academy of Political Science, and Public Works LLC/Brain Storm Consulting.

I HAVE A FEELING THAT I AM ULTIMATELY just going to be tying together a lot of themes that have been percolating over the course of the last day, but I wanted to just start with a line of poetry that I think about almost every day. It comes from Mary Oliver, who passed away last month. She was one of the few poets who people who just stumble upon in Barnes & Noble or click on Amazon happen to buy. Her great theme was how we needed to pay greater attention to the world, which she did through taking long walks on Cape Cod, staring at leaves, and looking at foxes. She wrote a line that, as I said, just sticks with me, which is, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

Attention is the beginning of devotion. When I think about Facebook, and I think about the Google world that we have stumbled into, we have such a hard time truly registering the damage that they have done to us. I think that the greatest violence that they have done to us, as individuals, is that they make it hard for us to be devoted. Attention is the beginning of devotion. In order to be a spiritual person, in order to be a truly loving person, you need to be able to pause and pay attention.

I will get to the political and economic problems of the platform monopolies, but I think that we always need to return to the core question of attention. The reason that they amass so much data is that they are composing this cartography of our mind. They have figured out how to map our psyche. Data is such a bloodless word, but data is a dossier that helps to unlock us.

Therefore, data is more than just the things that you willingly submit to these companies. It is everything that you have read on the Internet. It is every question you begin to enter into Google. When you begin to compose a post on Facebook and delete it, that too, is saved by their packrat servers. The cost of computing is so cheap, they are able to amass everything, whether it is important to them in the short-term or not.

They do not know what is important, so they keep everything, and the algorithms troll in order to find the hidden patterns in the way that you think. The result is that they have been able to probe you in order to find the things that bring you pleasure, to find the things that cause you anxiety, and that data, that portrait of the inside of your head, is in turn used to manipulate you—in order to commandeer as much of your attention as possible.

This is the world that we live in and that is the basis for the power of Facebook and Google. Part of the power is its invisibility. Polling of Facebook users shows pretty clearly, that despite the Facebook scandals, in spite of everything that has been exposed in the *New York Times*, or on TV, about Facebook—people are still largely unaware of the existence of the algorithm, and the fact that the news and information they are consuming has been given a sense of hierarchy.

It is not just friends showing friends articles or pictures. There is a sense of hierarchy that has been imposed on the news and information we consume via these platforms. That information has been arrayed in such a way to keep us engaged for as long as possible, to occupy as much of our attention as possible.

I consider this a public health problem, because I know this myself. I mean, even though I wrote a book trashing these companies, and even though I am fully aware of all the perils that they pose, I would not be honest with you if I did not admit that I am engaged in a deep struggle with my own relationship to technology. That if I want to get a good night's sleep, I have to stick my phone in the basement, because otherwise I know that there will be a moment in the middle of the night where I reach for my phone and I get trapped in a zombie scroll. Then you wake up the next morning and you know that your rhythms are completely off, and you have zero recollection of the thing you looked at in the middle of the night.

When I talk to people at the companies, I use the word “addiction”, to which they will respond, that “addiction” is a scientific term. What they produce, yes, it is designed to get people engaged for as long as possible, but they do not see it as an addiction. However, I really do think that we need to think of it as a form of addiction.

If I were to distill the peril that these companies pose, it is something that begins at the level of the individual, and then we can see how it is replicated at other levels, which is a relationship that is very unhealthy. You could call it addicted or dependent. The dependency that we each feel on our phones is something that is replicated in larger parts of the economy. These companies are now engaged in an arms race to become our personal assistant, and that is the reason why they are all trying to implant those little speakers in the corner of your bedroom or your kitchen—so that you will be engaged in a never-ending conversation with their machine.

You will ask the machine questions, and the machine will supply answers, as the dream of Silicon Valley is frictionless-ness. That you should be relieved of the burden of making unnecessary decisions or unnecessary choices. That information and things should be delivered to you in the most seamless, effortless sort of way, so you can focus on whatever else.

As a result, that gives them even more power, because at least when you are looking at a Google search, as you know, everybody clicks on what appears first or second. Nobody makes it to page two, but at least there is a menu of options. As we become more merged with these machines, and as we interact with them in ways that are different from conventional reading, the less choices we are ultimately going to have. If you are to ask Google what today's news is, Google will not spit out options A, B and C. It is going to be whatever option A, that they have provided to you, is.

The dream, ultimately, is this human dream. Technology is one of the things that defines us as a species: our ability to affect our environment. We have always been merging with machines. The hammer is an extension of the arm. The factory is the automation of upper-body strength. These are intellectual machines, and when we merge with these machines, we are not just merging with a tool. We are merging with the companies that operate them, and so they have amassed incredible power over our public square, as we have been talking about, over our economy, and I think, over the future of our species.

When I was researching my book, I spent a lot of time on YouTube watching the founders of these companies speak. As you listen to them, you realize the ways in which the technology press does not always serve us well, because when Larry Page or Mark Zuckerberg speak, they do not just speak about the latest app or the latest camera resolution that they are unveiling. They often say quite important and profound things about human nature, about the ways that we should organize ourselves, and I think they have a very strong view of human nature.

If you look at it on the surface, we have spent a lot of time assuming that the titans of Silicon Valley were Libertarians. They do not want to be regulated. A lot of them read Ayn Rand

at some point, so they spend a lot of time talking about it. However, if you listen hard to what they are saying, it is something that is quite different from a Randian view of individualism.

Ultimately, the way that they think about the world is a collectivist one in its outlook. That is why media is social. Why it is a hive mind. Why everything should be crowdsourced. There is this kind of fetish-ization, ultimately, of the collective. I think it helps explain part of the reason why these companies have been so insensitive to individualism and individuality. Why they are so willing to roll privacy. Why they have such a dismissive attitude towards authorship. Part of the reason why they are so happy to have their algorithms displace free will in any way, shape, or form. It is part of the reason why they ultimately view monopoly as the platonic state of capitalism.

The world is a network, and the network needs to be captured. If one firm captures the network, well, that is just the natural way of the world, and in the end it's the system that will deliver the most efficiency. We see this in journalism—where Facebook and Google have come—they were first perceived as friends. They were a means of breaking down an old, elitist world, where you had these fuddy-duddy gatekeepers sitting at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, who did not pay sufficient heed to the people out there. It seemed like it was a means of liberation, and then it was also a means to reach this much, much larger audience. If you published something and it got linked to in Google or Facebook, it was suddenly accessible to a much wider world, and it was greeted first as a friend.

We have seen now that, just as I am unhealthily dependent on my cell phone and media, the world achieved a similar sense of unhealthy dependence on the platforms. I will just give you a quick anecdote. As Eric said, I was the editor of *The New Republic*. This little magazine that always had a small audience. I think there was a point where—in the histories of the 1960s that I've read—one author said that the total circulation of the *New Republic* could have never filled half of the University of Mississippi football stadium.

It was a small magazine that was self-consciously elitist and never had a terribly large audience. Then, we had a particularly bracing contact with Facebook, because Mark Zuckerberg's roommate from college, who happened to be Facebook employee number three, bought the magazine. We started off, when he bought the magazine, with really noble intentions about having a benefactor, an enlightened benefactor, who wanted to help the magazine navigate its way into the new digital era with dignity.

It all started great, but then there came this inevitable moment where he said: You know what? There are stations of magazine ownership. The first station, you come in and you express your honorable intentions. The second station, you begin to panic about all the money that you have spent at the first station. The third station, you start to overreact. So, he said: You know what? I know exactly how we can make money quickly, which is by producing things that get traffic on social media.

We installed a Facebook guru on our staff, and in a very compressed period, we experienced something that the rest of media experienced. You begin to think about how you can master the platform. How you can produce things that will go viral on the platform. The platform suddenly offers me this opportunity to reach this much broader world that I would never have been able to get through print. But then you start to realize that you are not mastering the platform. The platform is actually mastering you, because the values of the platform end up implanting themselves in our brand.

You begin to play by the rules that the platform has set. I will give you a small example of this. There was a lion, a couple years ago, called Cecil. An endangered species. He was killed by a hunter, a dentist from Minnesota, who posted a picture of Cecil on Facebook. Everybody, quite rightly, was roused into a fit of anger over the murder of Cecil, and the key word in our era

is “trending.” Everybody wants to tap into the thing that is at the trailhead of its ascent to popularity. We all see this in our media offices, because we have access to all this data now ourselves.

Every journalist has something called Chartbeat, which is this meter that shows how popular something is at any given moment. If you walk into the newsroom of the *Washington Post*, there are these massive television screens over the newsroom showing what is popular at any given moment. That is a statement of values that management is telling its journalists—they want to be up there at the top of that screen.

And so, Cecil gets killed. You start to see these pockets of outrage on the Internet, and you want some of that traffic, too. Thus, every news organization begins to converge on the same subject, and in the end, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, I am sure *US Weekly*, BuzzFeed, whatever it may be, everybody converges on Cecil the Lion. In the end, there are 3.2 million stories written about the sad death of Cecil the Lion.

I think it shows a couple things. In part, one of the promises of platforms like Facebook and Google was that we would rise into this golden age of personalization. That it would be a place where we could all find our niche and our niche would be served. The rise of the platforms has allowed us some of that, but they have also contributed to a new age of conformism. It is very hard to see sometimes, but it has happened. You also see the way that media begins to think so much more about audience, in that it creates these feedback loops.

One of the most important terms of our age is the “filter bubble” concept: that we exist in a world where our biases are constantly being confirmed, and that, too, is its own form of conformism. Once you are sorted into your filter bubble, into your community, you are being served the information that you want to hear. We have seen the ways in which that is incredibly dangerous. When your bias is constantly being confirmed, you are in the process of being intellectually weakened. You become susceptible to fake news, propaganda, and demagoguery.

I would argue that in a way, our current president is the political version of Cecil the Lion. When Trump came onto the scene, I think many of the liberal media outlets had its own reasons for paying attention to Donald Trump. When he talked about Barack Obama’s birth certificate, the anger that generated was something the liberal media liked to tap into, because they saw the ways in which it would give us traffic.

We have seen what happened to BuzzFeed, which is a classic example of a media organization that set out to master the platform, but then became mastered by it. Jonah Peretti, founder of BuzzFeed, was a graduate student at the MIT Media Lab, and his Ph.D. dissertation was about the concept of virality. When he was a graduate student, he conducted an experiment that tried to make the concept of Nike’s sweatshop labor into something that would travel virally. He started to try to figure out the ways in which content could be produced to explode over Facebook. He built a massive media organization that was suddenly talked about in the same breath as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*.

It was all premised on its relationship to Facebook. It did not matter if you went to BuzzFeed.com to get the news, or if you accessed it on Pinterest, Instagram, or Facebook. It was all about creating pieces of content that tapped into people’s emotions, and therefore traveled across these social networks. It became phenomenally successful, and it has attracted investment from all the big players in the industry. In the end, that dependence on Facebook made BuzzFeed enormously vulnerable. All it took was Facebook changing its business strategy, changing its algorithms, and they were hosed. That was what happened at the beginning of last year.

Facebook decided that, because of the Cambridge Analytica scandals and the Russia scandals, the news business was leaving it too vulnerable, and it was recommitting to its core mission, which was connecting individuals. Therefore, a BuzzFeed article was suddenly less privileged by the Facebook algorithm, and the picture you were sharing of your cat was boosted.

Then, it had the perverse effect of destroying the news organizations that were most catered to Facebook. As a result, Facebook had to lay off, I think it was, 15 percent of its staff. It had to shut down whole bureaus that it had opened up. So, what is the response to this dependent situation that we have created? Of course, there are personal responses. There is the Mary Oliver response, which is to disconnect yourself from the machine in order to create circumstances where you are able to reclaim ownership of your attention. I think we are going to talk a little bit more about some of the policy responses, but we have traditions in this country, within our political economy, that should equip us to respond to these monopolies.

If you look at the history of the United States, we have always been very concerned about concentrations of power in the communications space. The Post Office was the first communications monopoly, but we did not let it extend into the telegraph business. When Western Union achieved a monopoly in the telegram business, Ulysses S. Grant threatened to nationalize it. They were so worried about the government taking strong and decisive action against them, that they were afraid to get into the telephone business. Then when AT&T was in the telephone business, they essentially created this deal with the government, where they kept their monopoly in a regulated sort of way. But they were simultaneously afraid of getting into the radio business. Then, NBC got divided into NBC and ABC, when NBC was too powerful as a radio station. The Nixon administration opened up space to create the cable news industry.

The last example of this, I think, is one of the most underrated moments in recent American political economy—the Microsoft case, where the government told Microsoft that they did not like the abusive way that Microsoft used their power with both the browser and the desktop, and that the government was going to stop them. In the shadow of September 11, the Bush administration stayed its hand, and did not go as far as perhaps it would have, into ultimately breaking up Microsoft, but what happened was that you had countervailing powers. In effect, for a decade, Microsoft was scared. If you talk to people at Google, they will say that Microsoft could have strangled them in their crib, but they did not. Therefore, anti-trust and this great tradition of anti-monopoly thinking and legislation, and that impulse, has actually been an incredibly important engine of innovation. It creates space for challengers to walk in and take on the incumbents who seem so entrenched.

This backlash has emerged against Facebook and Google, and it came quite suddenly—I think taking the companies by surprise. Facebook especially has done a terrible job of managing its public image. They probably would admit that they had been under-invested in lobbying and the resources that would allow them to engage, but that is because the backlash came so suddenly. Even so, even with the ferocity of the backlash that has come on the heels of the Russian and Cambridge Analytical scandals, it is still so hard for us to imagine government taking meaningful action against these companies. There is the example in Europe that we can look towards, but I think even that feels distant from where we are sitting right now. I think everyone is making fun of me for being incredibly bleak before we got up here, and I am fairly bleak when it comes to the possibility of government taking action in the next couple of years.

The thing that does give me the greatest deal of encouragement is alongside the political track. The fact that you will have Democratic political candidates talking about economic concentration, probably for the first time in several generations, in this campaign. I think Elizabeth Warren has been particularly vocal on the question. It is something that she has spent a whole lot of time thinking about. I do think there is the possibility of an individual backlash happening, as well. Facebook's profits are still ginormous and not slowing down, but I do think we are at a moment where we are starting to pause as individuals to think again about this.

The example I used in the book, that I find most inspiring, is our relationship to the book. When Amazon debuted the Kindle at \$9.99 per book, it seemed like this irresistible thing. Here was every volume in human history suddenly accessible for less, and you could download

it in a heartbeat. Nicholas Negroponte who was the head of the MIT Media Lab said, “By the year 2015, paper books will disappear.” Lo and behold, we made this collective decision—I think it was largely subconscious—to resist the thing that was most convenient. To resist the thing that was cheaper. We made a decision that we wanted to inhabit spaces where we are not constantly receiving notifications. Where our attention is not constantly hijacked. Where you are not umbilically connected to a corporate store. There was a place where your attention really could be the beginning point of devotion. Thank you.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

FRANKLIN FOER is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. For seven years, he edited *The New Republic* magazine. He is the author of *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat Of Big Tech*, which was named one of the best non-fiction books of 2018 by the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles*, and NPR. He also wrote the international bestseller, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization*, which has been translated into 27 languages.