

ARGUMENT TWO

QUITTING SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE MOST FINELY TARGETED WAY TO RESIST THE INSANITY OF OUR TIMES

THE BUMMER MACHINE

It might not seem like it at first, but I'm an optimist. I don't think we have to throw the whole digital world away. A lot of it's great!

The problem isn't the smartphone, as suggested by a flood of articles with titles like "Has the Smartphone Destroyed a Generation?"¹ The problem isn't the internet, which is also routinely accused of ruining the world.²

Something *is* ruining the world, but it isn't that we're connecting with people at a distance using bits, or that we're staring into little glowing screens. To be sure, you can overdo staring at the little screen,³ just as you can overdo a lot of things, but that's not an existential problem for our species.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

² <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/03/how-the-internet-is-destroying-everything/>

³ <http://www.berkeleywellness.com/self-care/preventive-care/article/are-mobile-devices-ruining-our-eyes>

There is one particular high-tech thing, however, that is toxic even in small quantities. One new development that must be quashed. It's important to define the problem as accurately as possible, lest we confuse ourselves even more.

The problem is *in part* that we are all carrying around devices that are suitable for mass behavior modification. But that's not quite the right framing of our problem. After all, our devices can be used for other purposes, and often are.

The problem is not only that users are crammed into online environments that can bring out the worst in us. It's not only that so much power has concentrated into a tiny number of hands that control giant cloud computers.

The problem intersects with all those factors, but even that conglomeration isn't exactly the problem.

The problem occurs when all the phenomena I've just described are driven by a business model in which the incentive is to find customers ready to pay to modify someone else's behavior. Remember, with old-fashioned advertising, you could measure whether a product did better after an ad was run, but now companies are measuring whether *individuals* changed their behaviors, and the feeds for each person are constantly tweaked to get individual behavior to change. Your specific behavior change has been turned into a product. It's a particularly "engaging" product not just for users, but for customers/manipulators, because they worry that if they don't pay up, they'll be left out in the cold.

The problem is *all of the above* plus one more thing. As explained in the first argument, the scheme I am describing amplifies negative emotions more than positive ones, so it's more efficient at harming society than at improving it: creepier customers get more bang for their buck.

Finally, we can draw a circle around the problem. That means

we can kill it without collateral damage. Our problem is blessedly specific.

If we could just get rid of the deleterious business model, then the underlying technology might not be so bad. At least, we have to try, because otherwise we'll eventually have to gut a whole universe of digital technology. Tech was the last "god that hadn't failed,"⁴ the last bastion of optimism. We can't afford to ditch it.

If you have good experiences with social media, nothing in this book invalidates those experiences. In fact, my hope is that we—meaning both the industry and all of us—will find a way to keep and improve on what we love precisely by being precise about what must be rejected. Deleting your accounts now will improve the chances that you'll have access to better experiences in the future.

Some have compared social media to the tobacco industry,⁵ but I will not. The better analogy is paint that contains lead. When it became undeniable that lead was harmful, no one declared that houses should never be painted again. Instead, after pressure and legislation, lead-free paints became the new standard.⁶ Smart people simply waited to buy paint until there was a safe version on sale. Similarly, smart people should delete their accounts until nontoxic varieties are available.

I speak as a computer scientist, not as a social scientist or psychologist. From that perspective, I can see that time is running out. The world is changing rapidly under our command, so doing nothing is not an option. We don't have as much in the way of rigorous science as would be ideal for understanding our

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_God_that_Failed

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/elizabethmacbride/2017/12/31/is-social-media-the-tobacco-industry-of-the-21st-century/>

⁶ https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/20258_LEGISLATIVEHISTORY.PDF

situation, but we have enough results to describe the problem we must solve, just not a lot of time in which to solve it.

Seems like a good moment to coin an acronym so I don't have to repeat, over and over, the same account of the pieces that make up the problem. How about "Behaviors of Users Modified, and Made into an Empire for Rent"? BUMMER.

BUMMER is a machine, a statistical machine that lives in the computing clouds. To review, phenomena that are statistical and fuzzy are nevertheless real. Even at their best, BUMMER algorithms can only calculate the *chances* that a person will act in a particular way. But what might be only a chance for each person approaches being a certainty *on the average* for large numbers of people. The overall population can be affected with greater predictability than can any single person.

Since BUMMER's influence is statistical, the menace is a little like climate change. You can't say climate change is responsible for a particular storm, flood, or drought, but you can say it changes the odds that they'll happen. In the longer term, the most horrible stuff like sea level rise and the need to relocate most people and find new sources of food would be attributable to climate change, but by then the argument would have been lost.

Similarly, I can't prove that any particular asshole has been made more asshole-y by BUMMER, nor can I prove that any particular degradation of our society would not have happened anyway. There's no certain way to know if BUMMER has changed your behavior, though later on I'll offer some ways to find clues. If you use BUMMER platforms, you've probably been changed at least a little.

While we can't know what details in our world would be different without BUMMER, we can know about the big picture. Like climate change, BUMMER will lead us into hell if we don't self-correct.

THE PARTS THAT MAKE UP THE BUMMER MACHINE

BUMMER is a machine with six moving parts.

Here's a mnemonic for the six components of the BUMMER machine, in case you ever have to remember them for a test:

A is for Attention Acquisition leading to Asshole supremacy

B is for Butting into everyone's lives

C is for Cramming content down people's throats

D is for Directing people's behaviors in the sneakiest way possible

E is for Earning money from letting the worst assholes secretly screw with everyone else

F is for Fake mobs and Faker society

Here's a description of each part.

A is for Attention Acquisition leading to Asshole supremacy

People often get weird and nasty online. This bizarre phenomenon surprised everyone in the earliest days of networking, and it has had a profound effect on our world. While not every online experience is nasty, the familiar nastiness colors and bounds the overall online experience. Nastiness also turned out to be like crude oil for the social media companies and other behavior manipulation empires that quickly came to dominate the internet, because it fueled negative behavioral feedback.

Why does the nastiness happen? This will be explored in the next argument. In brief: Ordinary people are brought together in a setting in which the main—or often the only—reward that's available is attention. They can't reasonably expect

to earn money, for instance. Ordinary users can gain only fake power and wealth, not real power or wealth. So mind games become dominant.

With nothing else to seek but attention, ordinary people tend to become assholes, because the biggest assholes get the most attention. This inherent bias toward assholedom flavors the action of all the other parts of the BUMMER machine.

B *is for Butting into everyone's lives*

Component B was already introduced in the first argument.

Everyone is placed under a level of surveillance straight out of a dystopian science fiction novel. Pervasive spying could theoretically exist without the asshole-generating platforms in component A, but as it happens, the world we have created connects the two components most of the time.

Spying is accomplished mostly through connected personal devices—especially, for now, smartphones—that people keep practically glued to their bodies. Data are gathered about each person's communications, interests, movements, contact with others, emotional reactions to circumstances, facial expressions, purchases, vital signs: an ever growing, boundless variety of data.

If you're reading this on an electronic device, for instance, there's a good chance an algorithm is keeping a record of data such as how fast you read or when you take a break to check something else.

Algorithms correlate data from each person and between people. The correlations are effectively theories about the nature of each person, and those theories are constantly measured and rated for how predictive they are. Like all well-managed theories, they improve over time through adaptive feedback.

C is for Cramming content down people's throats

Algorithms choose what each person experiences through their devices. This component might be called a feed, a recommendation engine, or personalization.

Component C means each person sees different things. The immediate motivation is to deliver stimuli for *individualized* behavior modification.

BUMMER makes it harder to understand why others think and act the way they do. The effects of this component will be examined more in the arguments about how you are losing access to truth and the capacity for empathy.

(Not all personalization is part of BUMMER. When Netflix recommends a movie or eBay recommends something for you to buy, it isn't BUMMER. It only becomes BUMMER in connection with other components. Neither Netflix nor eBay is being paid by third parties to influence your behavior apart from the immediate business you do with each site.)

D is for Directing people's behaviors in the sneakiest way possible

The above elements are connected to create a measurement and feedback machine that deliberately modifies behavior. The process was described in the first argument.

To review: Customized feeds become optimized to "engage" each user, often with emotionally potent cues, leading to addiction. People don't realize how they are being manipulated. The default purpose of manipulation is to get people more and more glued in, and to get them to spend more and more time in the system.⁷ But other purposes for manipulation are also tested.

⁷The television era tried its best to be BUMMER, but without direct feedback loops to individuals. Through heroic effort, television was able to be slightly BUMMER

For instance, if you're reading on a device, your reading behaviors will be correlated with those of multitudes of other people. If someone who has a reading pattern similar to yours bought something after it was pitched in a particular way, then the odds become higher that you will get the same pitch. You might be targeted before an election with weird posts that have proven to bring out the inner cynic in people who are similar to you, in order to reduce the chances that you'll vote.

BUMMER platforms have proudly reported on how they've experimented with making people sad, changing voter turnout, and reinforcing brand loyalty. Indeed, these are some of the best-known examples of research that were revealed in the formative days of BUMMER.⁸

The digital network approach to behavior modification flattens all these examples, all these different slices of life, into one slice. From the point of view of the algorithm, emotions, happiness, and brand loyalty are just different, but similar, signals to optimize.

If it turns out that certain kinds of posts make you sad, and an algorithm is trying to make you sad, then there will be more such posts. No one will necessarily ever know why those particular posts had an effect on you, and you will probably not even notice that a particular post made you a little sad, or that you were being manipulated. The effect is subtle, but cumulative. While scientists sometimes dive in to try to glean insights, for the most part the process takes place in darkness, running on automatic; it's a new kind of sinister shadow cosmos.

The algorithms are rarely interrogated, least of all by external or independent scientists, in part because it's hard to understand why they work. They improve automatically, through feedback.

even without much data. "Cultivation theory" studies the phenomenon. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultivation_theory

⁸ This history will be recounted in later arguments.

One of the secrets of present-day Silicon Valley is that some people seem to be better than others at getting machine learning schemes to work, and no one understands why. The most mechanistic method of manipulating human behavior turns out to be a surprisingly intuitive art. Those who are good at massaging the latest algorithms become stars and earn spectacular salaries.

E is for Earning money from letting the worst assholes secretly screw with everyone else

The mass behavior modification machine is rented out to make money. BUMMER manipulations are not perfect, but they are powerful enough that it becomes suicidal for brands, politicians, and other competitive entities to forgo payments to BUMMER machines. Universal cognitive blackmail ensues, resulting in a rising global spend on BUMMER.⁹

If someone isn't paying a BUMMER platform in cash, then they must turn themselves into data-fuel for that platform in order to not be overwhelmed by it. When Facebook emphasized "news" in its feed, the entire world of journalism had to reformulate itself to BUMMER standards. To avoid being left out, journalists had to create stories that emphasized clickbait and were detachable from context. They were forced to become BUMMER in order to not be annihilated by BUMMER.

BUMMER has not only darkened the ethics of Silicon

⁹While digital spending on advertising and marketing might still be a little shy of half of all such spending globally—remember TV is still strong, especially for the aging generations that grew up with it—overall spending is going up, most *new* spending is digital, and almost all of that is BUMMER. Why should a society be spending more and more of its wealth on "advertising"? There are a huge number of industry reports on this topic, and estimates vary, but most analysts agree on this overall interpretation.

Valley; it has made the rest of the economy crazy. The economic side of BUMMER will be explored in Argument Nine.

Before moving on to Component F, I must explain the special role Component E plays in providing the financial incentives that keep the whole BUMMER machine in motion. If you hang out in Silicon Valley, you'll hear a lot of chatter about how money is becoming obsolete, how we're creating forms of power and influence that transcend money. Yet everybody still seems to be chasing money!

If owning everyone's attention by making the world terrifying happens to be what earns the most money, then that is what will happen, even if it means that bad actors are amplified. If we want something different to happen, then the way money is earned has to change.

In the wake of the 2016 elections in the United States, Facebook, Twitter, Google Search, and YouTube¹⁰ announced policy changes to combat dark ads, malicious fake news, hate speech, and so on. Regulators have also introduced requirements such as identifying political advertisers. Just as I was finishing this book, Facebook announced that it will deemphasize news in its feed; the journalism world celebrated, for the most part, because now it might become freer to connect to audiences on its own terms.

¹⁰Why is Google counted as alpha BUMMER? For one thing, Google invented the stuff before Facebook existed. Even so, if you're using only certain Google offerings, like Docs, you might not *experience* Google as BUMMER. Google's search, YouTube, and certain other services meet the criteria for BUMMER, however, even though they're not usually classified as social networking. YouTube uses an adaptive profile of you to drive a personalized feed of videos that is designed to be addictive, including an often nasty comments section, and it makes money when third parties pay to change what you see in order to change your behavior. Classic BUMMER. Furthermore, the content of your seemingly non-BUMMER Google activities, like composing emails, contributes data to the model that drives the BUMMER part.

These changes might very well have a de-BUMMING effect, at least for a while. Indeed, policy tweaks have improved nasty online social phenomena before. Reddit banned some ugly subreddits in 2015, and the flow of hate-posting lessened.

But tweaking doesn't undo the underlying incentives, so bad actors are likely to invent ever sneakier and more sophisticated countermeasures. That has also happened. To state the obvious, there's a rather vast industry called search engine optimization that's devoted to helping clients manipulate the constant policy changes at search engines.

If the incentives remain unchanged, can incremental reforms solve the problems of addiction, manipulation, and worldwide insanity inducement that BUMMER has wrought? If limited reforms can make a difference, I'm all for them, and I hope changes to Facebook's feed make the world a little better, but I fear tweaking cannot achieve enough. That is one of my reasons for writing this book.

Underlying incentives tend to overpower policies. The way that people get around rules in order to chase incentives often makes the world into a darker and more dangerous place. Prohibitions generally don't work. When the United States attempted to outlaw alcohol in the early twentieth century, the result was a rise of organized crime. The ban had to be rescinded. When marijuana was outlawed later in the century, the same thing happened. Prohibitions are engines of corruption that split societies into official and criminal sectors. Laws work best when they are reasonably aligned with incentives.

Tweaking the rules of BUMMER without changing the underlying incentives will probably meet a similar failure. Tweaks have already failed: BUMMER pioneers like Google and Facebook have avidly chased bad actors, fakers, and unsanctioned manipulators, and the result has been the rise of

technically accomplished, underground cyber mafias, sometimes working for unfriendly states.

The most dispiriting side effect of BUMMER policy-tweaking is that each cycle in the arms race between platforms and bad actors motivates more and more well-meaning people to demand that BUMMER companies take over more and more of our lives. We ask remote, giant tech companies to govern hate speech, malicious falsified news, bullying, racism, harassment, identity deception, and other nasty things. Well-intentioned activists demand that corporations govern behavior more and more. "Please tell us what we can say, oh rich young programmers of Silicon Valley! Discipline us!" The bad actors who wish to discredit democracy using the BUMMER machine win even when losing ground to well-meaning activists.

There are examples of unfortunate BUMMER incentives throughout this book. Argument Nine proposes a different incentive structure that might make the world better. Onward to Component F!

F is for Fake mobs and Faker society

This component is almost always present, even though it typically wasn't part of the initial design of a BUMMER machine. Fake people are present in unknown but vast numbers and establish the ambiance. Bots, AIs, agents, fake reviewers, fake friends, fake followers, fake posters, automated catfishers: a menagerie of wraiths.

Invisible social vandalism ensues. Social pressure, which is so influential in human psychology and behavior, is synthesized.

The crucial role of fake people will be explored in the argument about Truth, which comes after the next one about Assholes.

THE PROBLEM IS LIMITED, SO WE CAN CONTAIN IT

The more specifically we can draw a line around a problem, the more solvable that problem becomes. Here I have put forward a hypothesis that our problem is not the internet, smartphones, smart speakers, or the art of algorithms. Instead, the problem that has made the world so dark and crazy lately is the BUMMER machine, and the core of the BUMMER machine is not a technology, exactly, but a style of *business plan* that spews out perverse incentives and corrupts people.

It's not even a widely used business plan. Outside of China, the only tech giants that fully depend on BUMMER are Facebook and Google. The other three of the big five tech companies indulge in BUMMER occasionally, because it is normalized these days, but they don't depend on it. A few smaller BUMMER companies are also influential, like Twitter,¹¹ though they often struggle. One of the reasons I'm optimistic is that BUMMER isn't great as a long-term business strategy. I'll explain that observation more in the argument about economics.

Which companies are BUMMER? This can be debated! A good way to tell is that first-rank BUMMER companies are the ones that attract efforts or spending from bad actors like Russian state intelligence warfare units. This test reveals that there are pseudo-BUMMER services that contain only subsets of the components, like Reddit and 4chan, but still play significant roles in the BUMMER ecosystem.

Next-order services that might become BUMMER but haven't achieved scale are operated by the other tech giants,

¹¹ <https://slate.com/technology/2018/03/twitter-is-rethinking-everything-at-last.html>

Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple, as well as by smaller companies like Snap.

But this second argument is not about corporations, it's about you. Because we can draw a line around the BUMMER machine, we can draw a line around what to avoid.

The problem with BUMMER is not that it includes any particular technology, but that it's someone else's power trip.

Methodical behaviorism, described in the first argument, isn't in itself a problem, for instance. You might choose to be treated by a cognitive behavioral therapist, and benefit from it. Hopefully that therapist will have sworn an oath to uphold professional standards and will earn your trust. If, however, your therapist is beholden to a giant, remote corporation and is being paid to get you to make certain decisions that aren't necessarily in your own interests, then that would be a BUMMER.

Similarly, hypnotism isn't in itself a BUMMER. But if your hypnotist is replaced by someone you don't know who is working for someone else you don't know, and you have no way of knowing what you're being hypnotized to do, then that *would* be a BUMMER.

The problem isn't any particular technology, but the use of technology to manipulate people, to concentrate power in a way that is so nuts and creepy that it becomes a threat to the survival of civilization.

If you want to help make the world sane, you don't need to give up your smartphone, using computer cloud services, or visiting websites. You don't need to fear math, the social sciences, or psychology.

BUMMER is the stuff to avoid. Delete your BUMMER accounts!

ARGUMENT THREE

SOCIAL MEDIA IS MAKING YOU INTO AN ASSHOLE

Let me rephrase this argument's title. I don't know you. I'm not saying that you personally are definitely turning into an asshole, but many people are, yet they seem to only see that many *other* people are. I've seen myself start turning into an asshole online, and it was scary and depressing.

So what I should really say is something like "You're vulnerable to gradually turning into an asshole, or statistically you might very well be turning into an asshole. So, no offense, but please take the possibility seriously."

SOOTY SNOW

Addicts can try to hide an addiction, especially from themselves, but often it shows. Personalities change.

The deeply addicted person's rhythm becomes nervous, a compulsive pecking at his situation; he's always deprived, rushing for affirmation. Addicts become anxious, strangely focused

on portentous events that aren't visible to others. They are selfish, so wrapped up in their cycle that they don't have much time to notice what others are feeling or thinking about. There's an arrogance, a fetish for exaggeration, that by all appearances is a cover for profound insecurity. A personal mythology overtakes addicts. They see themselves grandiosely and, as they descend further into addiction, ever less realistically.

Hard-core social media addicts display these changes, just like junkies or ruinous gamblers. More commonly, BUMMER users become a *little* like this, statistically more likely to behave like an addict at any given time. There are shades of gray, just as with everything else about BUMMER. The whole society has darkened a few shades as a result.

The most curious feature of the addict's personality is that the addict eventually seems to seek out suffering, since suffering is part of the cycle of scratching the itch. A gambler is addicted not to winning, exactly, but to the process in which losing is more likely. A junkie is addicted not just to the high, but to the vertiginous difference between the lows and the highs.

Similarly, a BUMMER addict eventually becomes preternaturally quick to take offense, as if hoping to get into a spat.

Addicts also become aggressive, though they feel they are acting out of necessity. The choice is to victimize or be a victim. Even successful and pleasant BUMMER addicts, like top social media influencers, have reported that they must not be too nice to others, for that shows weakness¹ in a highly competitive fishbowl. One must be followed more than one follows, for appearances' sake.

The characteristic personality change is hard to perceive or acknowledge in oneself, but easier to see in others, especially if

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/business/hollywood-apartment-social-media.html>

you don't like them. When conservative BUMMER addicts dislike liberal college students with BUMMER addictions, they sometimes use the insult "poor little snowflake."

The poorest snowflake of them all, however, is Donald Trump, who exhibits the same behavior. I met him a few times over several decades, and I didn't like him, but he wasn't a BUMMER addict back then. He was a New York City character, a manipulator, an actor, a master at working the calculus of chums and outcasts. But as a character he was in on his own joke. Even reality TV didn't really make him lose it.

As a Twitter addict, Trump has changed. He displays the snowflake pattern and sometimes loses control. He is not acting like the most powerful person in the world, because his addiction is more powerful. Whatever else he might be, whatever kind of victimizer, he is also a victim.

MEETING MY INNER TROLL

Many things about social media have changed over the years, but the basic form was already around when I first got into computers in the late 1970s. The social media we had back then amounted to little more than commenting, just a bunch of people adding their text. There wasn't any voting for favorite posts, nor did algorithms customize your feed. Very basic.

But I noticed something horrifying all those years ago. Sometimes, out of nowhere, I would get into a fight with someone, or a group of people. It was so weird. We'd start insulting each other, trying to score points, getting under each other's skin. And about incredibly stupid stuff, like whether or not someone knew what they were talking about when it came to brands of pianos. Really.

I'd stew between posts. "I am *not* ignorant! I know about pianos! How dare that moron say those horrible things about

me? I know, I'll ruin his reputation by tricking him into saying something stupid."

This happened so often that it became normal. Not just for me, but for everyone. It was chaotic human weather. There'd be a nice morning and suddenly a storm would roll in.

In order to avoid falling into asshole behavior you had to make yourself fake-nice. You'd have to be saccharine polite, constantly choosing your words super carefully, walking on eggshells.

That sucked worse!

I just stopped using the stuff because I didn't like who I was becoming. You know the adage that you should choose a partner on the basis of who you become when you're around the person? That's a good way to choose technologies, too.

When some friends started a pioneering online community called the Well in the 1990s, they gave me an account, but I never posted a single thing. Same story much later, when I helped some buddies start an online world called Second Life.

In the early 2000s, an enterprising woman named Arianna Huffington got me to blog on her Huffington Post for a while. I have to tell you how she did it.

We were at a fancy conference for rich and influential people at a fancy little town in the Colorado Rockies. I was sitting on a bench with my arm resting on the rim of a rounded cement wall surrounding a garbage can. Arianna came along and sat on my arm, trapping it. "Arianna—oh, you didn't notice; let me get my arm out."

In her thick Greek accent: "Do you know what some men would pay for this privilege? I will release your hand if you will blog for me."

So I did it. Briefly I was one of the HuffPost's top bloggers, always on the front page. But I found myself falling into that old problem again whenever I read the comments, and I could

not get myself to ignore them. I would feel this weird low-level boiling rage inside me. Or I'd feel this absurd glow when people liked what I wrote, even if what they said didn't indicate that they had paid much attention to it. Comment authors were mostly seeking attention for themselves.

We were all in the same stew, manipulating each other, inflating ourselves.

After a short while, I noticed that I'd write things I didn't even believe in order to get a rise out of readers. I wrote stuff that I knew people wanted to hear, or the opposite, because I knew it would be inflammatory.

Oh my God! I was back in that same place, becoming an asshole because of *something* about this stupid technology!

I quit—again.

Of all the ten arguments in this book, this is the one that really gets to me viscerally. I don't want to be an asshole. Or a fake-nice person.

I want to be authentically nice, and certain online designs seem to fight against that with magical force. That's the core reason why I don't have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp,² Instagram, Snapchat, or any of the rest. You'll see fake accounts in my name. There's even a supposed @RealJaronLanier on Twitter. But I have no idea who that is. Not me.

I don't think I'm better than you because I don't have social media accounts. Maybe I'm worse; maybe you can handle the stuff better than I can.

²WhatsApp is part of Facebook; even if it sometimes feels like any other texting platform, it's in fact a primary data scooper for BUMMER. Facebook has faced considerable legal blowback for using WhatsApp data that way in Europe (see <https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/18/16792448/whatsapp-facebook-data-sharing-no-user-consent>). In the United States, since the network neutrality rules are being relaxed, it's possible that *all* texting, even native texting between phones, will become part of BUMMER, but as of this writing it doesn't appear to have happened.

But I've observed that since social media took off, assholes are having more of a say in the world.

BUMMER platform experiences ricochet between two extremes. Either there's a total shitstorm of assholes (that's not a mixed metaphor, right?) or everyone is super careful and artificially nice.

The biggest assholes get the most attention, however, and they often end up giving a platform its flavor. Even if there are corners of the platform where not everyone is an asshole all the time, those corners feel penned in, because the assholes are waiting just outside. It's part of how BUMMER Component A pushes tribalism.

THE MYSTERIOUS NATURE OF ASSHOLE AMPLIFICATION TECHNOLOGY

No one has convinced me that they have a complete understanding of why Component A brings out one's inner asshole. There are many theories,³ but here are the ideas that have served me best.

It's not helpful to think of the world as being divided into assholes and non-assholes, or if you prefer, trolls and victims.

Each of us has an inner troll. In the early days, before everyone was doing it, the air was clearer and it was easier to notice how bizarre it is when your inner troll starts talking. It's like an ugly alien living inside you that you long ago forgot about. Don't let your inner troll take control! If it happens when you're in a particular situation, avoid that situation! It

³The most prominent current academic approach to the study of asshole creation is SIDE Theory. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_identity_model_of_deindividuation_effects, but please promise me you won't become a jerk in an edit war about this entry, okay? If you want to read relevant research from a scientist working for Facebook, see the work of Justin Cheng: <https://www.clr3.com/>.

doesn't matter if it's an online platform, a relationship, or a job. Your character is like your health, more valuable than anything you can buy. Don't throw it away.

But why, *why* is the inner troll there at all?

It's such a common problem that it must be a deep, primal business, a tragedy of our inheritance, a stupid flaw at the heart of the human condition. But saying that doesn't get us anywhere. What exactly *is* the inner troll?

Sometimes the inner troll takes charge, sometimes it doesn't. My working hypothesis has long been that there's a switch deep in every human personality that can be set in one of two modes. We're like wolves. We can either be solitary or members of a pack of wolves. I call this switch the Solitary/Pack switch.

When we're solitary wolves, we're more free. We're cautious, but also capable of more joy. We think for ourselves, improvise, create. We scavenge, hunt, hide. We howl once in a while out of pure exuberance.

When we're in a pack, interactions with others become the most important thing in the world. I don't know how far that goes with wolves, but it's dramatic in people. When people are locked in a competitive, hierarchical power structure, as in a corporation, they can lose sight of the reality of what they're doing because the immediate power struggle looms larger than reality itself.

The example that looms largest today is climate change denialism. In the scientific community and among virtually all nations in the world, there's a consensus that we must confront it, and yet a small but powerful group of businesspeople and politicians don't buy it. They perceive the science of climate change as a plot to attack their wealth and power. That's an absurd notion, an absurdity that's only possible when you're locked into understanding the world solely in terms of human power struggles, to the exclusion of the larger reality.

For a creature of the technical world, it's comforting to highlight an example like that, because it lets us off the hook, but scientific communities can also suffer from the switch being set to Pack. For instance, the theoretical physicist Lee Smolin documented how string theorists exerted mob rule for a while in the world of theoretical physics.⁴ The pattern is found whenever people form into groups. Street gangs perceive only pack concepts such as territory and revenge, even as they destroy their lives, families, and neighborhoods. The Pack setting of the switch makes you pay so much attention to your peers and enemies in the world of packs that you can become blind to what's happening right in front of your face.

When the Solitary/Pack switch is set to Pack, we become obsessed with and controlled by a pecking order. We pounce on those below us, lest we be demoted, and we do our best to flatter and snipe at those above us at the same time. Our peers flicker between "ally" and "enemy" so quickly that we cease to perceive them as individuals. They become archetypes from a comic book. The only constant basis of friendship is shared antagonism toward other packs.

Yes, I'm mixing animal metaphors. Sure, I think a modern "domesticated" cat is more like a solitary wolf than like a wolf in a pack, though cats are also intensely concerned with hierarchical social structures. Maybe cats have a Pride switch, and living with people gave them the freedom to deemphasize prides. The richer the hunting ground, the easier it is to not be an asshole toward your peers. Moving in with people might have been for cats what advancing technology has been for people. More options means more chances to not be a troll. At least that's what advancing technology has usually meant in the big

⁴<http://leesmolin.com/writings/the-trouble-with-physics/>

picture of human history. BUMMER is an unfortunate exception, a way of using technology to reduce human freedom.

The switch in people should generally be kept in the Solitary Wolf position.

When people are solitary wolves, then each individual has access to slightly different information about the world, and slightly different ways of thinking about that information. I've been talking about the relationship between the Solitary setting and personal character, but there are other reasons to keep the switch in the Solitary position.

Consider a demonstration that is often enacted on the first day of business school. A professor shows a class a big jar of jelly beans and asks each person to estimate the number of beans. Averaging all the estimates usually results in a pretty accurate count. Each person brings different perspectives, cognitive styles, skills, and strategies to the mystery, and the average gets at the agreements between them. (This only works for single-number answers. If you ask a committee to design a product or write a novel, the result comes out like something made by a committee.)

Now suppose that the students could look at the jar only through photos in a social media feed. Different camps of people with different ideas about the number of beans would form and would ridicule each other. Russian intelligence services would add pictures of similar jars with different numbers of beans. Bean promoters would motivate trolls to argue that there aren't enough beans and you must buy more. And so on. There would no longer be a way to guess the number of beans because the power of diversity will have been compromised. When that happens, markets can no longer offer utility to the world.

You can replace the jar with a political candidate, a product, or anything else. But that brings up problems that I'll tackle in

the arguments about how BUMMER ruins our access to truth and meaning.

For now, think of the jar in this example as being like your identity, as it is presented through social media. Your identity is Packified by BUMMER. By putting yourself out there, you are erasing yourself. As long as people are thinking for themselves, then collectively they'll guess the number of jelly beans in the jar, but that won't work if they're in a pack and stuck in groupthink.

There are situations that call for the switch to be set to Pack. Military units are the canonical example. Sometimes people must lose themselves to a hierarchical order because that's the only way to survive. But a primary goal of civilization should be to make those times as rare as possible.

Capitalism fails when the switch is set to Pack. The Pack setting causes market bubbles and other market failures. There are certainly noisy businesspeople who prefer military metaphors for business; you're supposed to be tough and ruthless. But since the Pack setting also makes you partially blind, in the long run that personality style is not great for business, if we define business as being about reality beyond social competitions.

When people act as solitary wolves, then each person is in a unique position in society and thinks in a unique way. Another example: Democratic elections are a genuine commingling of ideas, and have historically helped societies find paths forward despite controversy, but only so long as people are switched to Solitary. Democracy fails when the switch is set to Pack. Tribal voting, personality cults, and authoritarianism are the politics of the Pack setting.

It might sound like a contradiction at first, but it isn't; collective processes make the best sense when participants are acting as individuals.

THE MOST MASTERFUL MASTER SWITCH⁵

Suppose you believe the theory of the Solitary/Pack switch. What is it about online experiences that turns the switch to the Pack setting? The simplest answer is probably the right one. The switch will turn to the Pack setting when the benefits of the Solitary Wolf setting are made obscure.

When you are a solitary wolf, you are forced to get directly in touch with the larger reality that doesn't care about what a society thinks. You must find water and shelter, or you will perish. You have to scavenge and hunt for yourself. Your personality shifts; you must solve problems on the basis of evidence you gather on your own, instead of by paying attention to group perception. You take on the qualities of a scientist or an artist.

When you're in a pack, social status and intrigues become more immediate than the larger reality. You become more like an operator, a politician, or a slave.

Therefore, situations in which you are separated from immediate contact with larger reality, in which social interactions become preeminent, will turn your inner switch to Pack.

Aside from ringing true, this theory matches available evidence. For instance, of the large social networks, the one with the fewest assholes is LinkedIn.⁶ That doesn't mean that LinkedIn doesn't have other BUMMER problems. Tristan Harris singles it out for criticism related to exploiting social anxieties in the name of engagement, for example.⁷

Full disclosure: I have a professional connection to LinkedIn that might impair my objectivity (even though I don't have an

⁵ Shout-out to Tim Wu.

⁶ <https://www.recode.net/2016/12/29/14100064/linkedin-daniel-roth-fake-news-facebook-recode-podcast>

⁷ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/smartphone-addiction-is-part-of-the-design-a-1104237.html>

account on the site). You should not accept what I say without thinking about it critically, and my disclosure of a conflict of interest is a great starting point to do that. Think for yourself!

Anyway, while the people I know at LinkedIn are lovely, I can also say that about people I know at Twitter and Facebook. The difference with LinkedIn is simply that users of LinkedIn have *something* to do other than compete for social appearances—something with meatier stakes. The site is well known as a place to further your career. It makes money mostly by connecting employers with hires rather than by manipulating people to make purchases or change their behavior in other off-topic ways.

Careers are physical, real processes that generate sustenance. They are not only real but also nonfungible. Each career is both unique and indispensable to a person. LinkedIn users aren't all seeking exactly the same career, so they aren't forced precisely into direct conflict or politics with one another. They aren't each assigned a popularity number, like social media aspirants who are thrust into a single global competition.

Users on LinkedIn have something to do other than social posing, which tends to fuel assholes; and most people will choose to be something other than an asshole, *given the choice*. A prevalent layer of motivation to do *anything* aside from attention-getting or seeking other purely psychological rewards is the key. That simple quality, that there are stakes beyond mind games, elevates an online environment.

It's that simple. Practicality—which includes how you make a living—is ultimately what unites, and therefore civilizes us.⁸

⁸ When you're not on BUMMER it becomes possible to be tough and yet not a jerk. What I hope is happening in this book is that I'm using salty language and getting emotional, and yet I don't vilify and condemn people. "BUMMER sucks, but it's mostly just a stupid business plan, and the people behind it are usually great and just made a mistake and we all need to outgrow it." See? It's not that hard to be firm and intense without having to hate. In fact, out here in reality, it's hard to even remember

In BUMMERland, it seems as if every little comment either turns into a contest for total personal invalidation and destruction, or else everyone has to get all nicey-nicey and fake. The obvious example is that the BUMMER-addicted U.S. president, the social media addict-in-chief, turns everything into a contest over who can destroy someone else most completely with a tweet, or else who gets good treatment in exchange for total loyalty.

GO TO WHERE YOU ARE KINDEST.

Of course there were assholes in the world before BUMMER, but it wasn't as hard to avoid being one. On BUMMER you have to fight gravity just to be decent.

The online asshole-supremacy problem could be solved rather easily simply by dumping the BUMMER model of business. One possibility is that people could earn money more often and more fairly from what they do online; that idea will be explored in the argument about how social media is ruining economics.

What we need is *anything* that's real beyond social pretensions that people can focus on instead of becoming assholes.

In the meantime, there is something you can do personally. If, when you participate in online platforms, you notice a nasty thing inside yourself, an insecurity, a sense of low self-esteem, a yearning to lash out, to swat someone down, *then leave that platform*. Simple.

There is a spotlight on online bullying, as there should be, and you might have experienced being bullied online. Many, many people have.

what it feels like to have your inner troll try to take over. That's why I'm writing this as a book instead of an online post.

But I am also asking you to notice, within your own mind, in genuine secrecy—don't share this—if you are feeling the temptation to strike out at *someone else* online. Maybe that other person started it. Whatever. It isn't worth it. Leave the platform. Don't post that insult video, don't tweet in retaliation.

If Twitter ceased operations tomorrow, not only would Trump not be able to tweet, obviously, but also I believe he'd become a nicer, better person at all hours, at least until he latched on to another BUMMER platform.

I can't prove this, and a lot of people will disagree with me. That doesn't matter. Look into yourself. Seriously, are you being as kind as you want to be? At what times are you more like the person you want to be, and when do you get irritable or dismissive?

Your character is the most precious thing about you. Don't let it degrade.

ARGUMENT FOUR

SOCIAL MEDIA IS UNDERMINING TRUTH

EVERYBODY KNOWS

The notion that truth has recently become dead is one of the most familiar tropes of our times.¹ And the murderer most often accused is social media, or a certain president who is addicted to social media. Articles with titles like “How Technology Disrupted the Truth”² are plentiful enough that I hardly need to pile on.

This book contains varied explanations for how and why social media undermines truth; the explanations are central to each of the other nine arguments.

Furthermore, each of components A–F of BUMMER destroys truth in its own way.

¹ <https://backissues.time.com/storefront/2017/is-truth-dead-/prodTD20170403.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth>

- A** Asshholes change discourse into discharge. They turn the Solitary/Pack switch to Pack, which makes people pay so much attention to social status competition that they can become blinded to everything else, to any broader or more fundamental truth.
- B** Tech companies spy on you, Butting into your life. The perception of truth requires that people be authentic, so that they can perceive authentically. This principle was explained in the analogy of the jelly beans in the jar. When people are constantly prodded by spying technologies, they lose authenticity.
- C** Cramming experiences down your throat. When what people can be made to perceive *is* the product sold by some of the richest corporations, then obviously truth must suffer. The loss of truth is the product.
- D** Directing lives through ubiquitous behavior modification. When engineered addictions are applied to manipulate masses of people for commercial gain, obviously those masses become removed from truth. That is precisely the point.
- E** Earning money by letting some people, often nasty ones, secretly modify the behaviors of other people. Economic incentives tend to win over rules, policies, and good intentions, as will be explained in the Argument to come about economics. Therefore, incentives in BUMMER often disfavor truth. At best, they aren't aligned with truth.
- F** Fake people have no reason to tell the truth. Indeed, truth is suicide to a fake person. But fake people have been bred and amplified by BUMMER.

Truth, meaning a claim that can be tested or events that are honestly documented—the stuff that *all* people can hold in

common—is by definition anathema to the manipulations of BUMMER. BUMMER must often route around truth and attempt to suppress it in order to thrive.

WHEN PEOPLE ARE FAKE, EVERYTHING BECOMES FAKE

The fake people from Component F are stem cells for all the other fakeness in BUMMER.

Leaving aside explicitly fake people like Alexa, Cortana, and Siri, you might think that you've never interacted with a fake person online, but you have, and with loads of them. You decided to buy something because it had a lot of good reviews, but many of those reviews were from artificial people. You found a doctor by using a search engine, but the reason that doctor showed up high in the search results was that a load of fake people linked to her office. You looked at a video or read a story because so many other people had, but most of them were fake. You became aware of tweets because they were retweeted first by armies of bots.

Our peer groups influence us profoundly when we're young, but that remains true throughout life. If your extended peer group contains a lot of fake people, calculated to manipulate you, you are likely to be influenced without even realizing it.

This is a difficult truth to accept, but because of the importance of social perception, it is true to at least a small degree that you have been living a fake life yourself. BUMMER is making *you* partially fake.

Whatever you can do, bots can do a million times while you blink. Fake people are a *cultural* denial-of-service attack.

In a denial-of-service attack, hackers get a bot army to bombard a site with so much traffic that no real person can

access it. This is a typical way that bad actors make use of computer viruses. They infect millions of computers with a virus and then get those computers to contact a victim site all at once. Or, more commonly, they sell that ability as a service.

In the same way, armies of fake people on a BUMMER platform take up a lot of the oxygen in the room and steer the world on behalf of their masters.

Fake people are typically not operated by the same people who operate BUMMER platforms; instead, fake people are manufactured in a new underworld. There is now an industry that sells counterfeit humans.

According to reporting by the *New York Times*, the going rate for fake people on Twitter in early 2018 was \$225 for the first 25,000 fake followers.³ The fake accounts might be mash-ups of accounts from real people; on casual inspection, they seem real. Celebrities, businesses, politicians, and a more modern pool of cyber-bad-actor customers all make use of fake-people factories. The companies that sell fake people are often fake as well. (The *Times* found that one prominent bot service listed a fake address.)

Some sites might not even exist were it not for fake people. The best-known example might be Ashley Madison, a purported introduction service for adulterers. The site has reportedly used fake women to lure men into signing up for more expensive accounts.⁴ It has even been accused of creating fake critics to drum up controversy to promote itself.⁵

The mainstream BUMMER companies don't have completely clean hands when it comes to bots. It is hard for main-

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ashleymadison-cyber/infidelity-website-ashley-madison-facing-ftc-probe-ceo-apologizes-idUSKCN0ZL09J>

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2011/02/11/ashley-madison-lessons-in-promoting-a-sleazy-business/>

stream BUMMER operators to get rid of fake people entirely, because they become codependent, in the way that animals need gut bacteria. Component F provides momentum and free energy. The interlopers become part of the machine.

The tech companies all do battle with fake accounts, but they also benefit from them. While people who work at Twitter might, on an emotional or ethical level, prefer that their platform was bot-free, the bots also amplify the activity and intensity of the service. Massive fake social activities turn out to influence real people. They indirectly create a genuine social reality, which means they make money. People are successfully manipulated by them. Techies might rationalize the situation for themselves, coming up with arguments about how bots increase the diversity of free speech, or some similar nonsense,⁶ even though bots can drown out authentic speech.

Another phenomenon that relates to Component F is the way some legacy media outlets, such as Fox News in the USA, have become more cranky and partisan. ("Legacy media" means TV, radio, and print in Silicon Valley-speak.) Why is this happening so overwhelmingly in the social media era when it was more muted before, at least in modern times? There are many reasons to explore, but one reason is surely that BUMMER can be used to craft a social ambience that makes what was once unthinkable thinkable. For example, the craziest conspiracy theories often start on BUMMER, amplified by artificial people, before they appear in hyper-partisan legacy media.⁷

Hyperpartisan outlets like Fox News can therefore be thought of as part of Component F. They are chunks of legacy

⁶ <https://slate.com/technology/2018/01/robots-deserve-a-first-amendment-right-to-free-speech.html>

⁷ <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/24/media/seth-rich-fox-news-retraction/index.html>

media that have been jury-rigged to become part of the BUMMER machine.⁸

Component F makes the BUMMER machine robust in its awfulness, so that tweaks attempting to improve it do little good. For instance, in the United States, regulators have asked social media companies to begin identifying who paid for an ad, but since there are uncountable multitudes of fake entities energizing the BUMMER machine, how can anyone know what such an identification will mean?

Bots route around attempts to tweak or regulate BUMMER. If BUMMER ads were to become tightly regulated, for instance, bots might whip up a blizzard of shitposts⁹ to accomplish what could no longer be done with ads. This is one of the reasons that BUMMER must be removed from our world.

In testimony before the U.S. Senate, lawyers for social media companies stated that they couldn't detect the fake people.¹⁰ They have no means.

This is dark comedy. The BUMMER algorithms are presumably trying to manipulate the fake people, just as they manipulate you; but unlike you, bots are immune.

I must emphasize that the kind of fake person I'm ridiculing is a mass-produced fraud intended to manipulate. It is absolutely not my place to judge what is authentic for you or how you construct your online persona. I'm criticizing a power relationship, not proposing a theory of authenticity. When a teenager

⁸ That is not to say that there is a conspiracy between new- and old-media companies. There has been more tension than cooperation. Remember, BUMMER is an automatic system that has been set in motion to optimize itself. It finds patterns that work, even when those patterns defy the emotional or political tendencies of those who make money from the patterns. Tensions between Fox News and Facebook are well known: Facebook is absorbing money that once would have been destined for old media.

⁹ <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/shitposting/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/31/facebook-russia-ads-senate-hearing-al-franken>

fakes an Instagram account, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Becoming literate in the ways of one's society is essential if one is to become a first-class citizen in it; if the society is based on fake people, you'd better learn how to make a fake person yourself.

BUMMER KILLS

Much of the damage done by BUMMER can be undone by deleting your accounts, but the social loss of truth spills out from BUMMER and hurts even people who are not engaged directly with BUMMER at all. There are many examples of this danger, especially in politics, but I'll focus here on public health.

I'm a father, and I want the children my daughter interacts with to be immunized. Immunization is a common good, a gift we can give each other. It is one of the greatest inventions in human history.

When I was growing up, there were still plenty of people twisting their way along on sidewalks, suffering from the deformations of polio. The victims who still lived and could walk at all were the lucky ones. It didn't matter if you were rich or poor, black or white. Anyone could get polio.

When was the last time you saw a polio victim? And polio is far from the only example. My parents' generation lived through epidemics that killed millions—tens of millions—of people.

Immunizations are better than electricity, flush toilets, and space exploration all put together. And I really love all those inventions.

But I know other parents—educated, upper-middle-class American parents—who won't even consider vaccinating their kids. Some of them are "left" and some "right." It's not just that

they think immunization is bad; they believe that it's evil, alien, and icky. They think it causes autism. They can't get conspiracy theories out of their heads. You might think I'm being elitist when I am more appalled that "educated" parents, who are more likely to be affluent, foment dangerous nonsense, but isn't the whole point of education supposed to be that it diminishes people's susceptibility to dangerous nonsense?

I have tried to engage with these parents, and that's when they show me their BUMMER feeds. Every day they digest memes, fake scare stories, and clickbait that appear to come¹¹ from bots, though no one really knows to what degree.¹² An ambience of paranoia and dismissal has overtaken these BUMMER addicts as they seek a new fix from positive and negative social stimuli every day.

There have always been weird waves of untruth in society, but somehow, in order to progress into our comfortable modernity, we gradually found a way to truth, together. What is different in recent years is that many of us no longer directly interrogate the jar of jelly beans.

In our BUMMER era, the information reaching people is the result of how manipulative advertisers and power-mad tech companies intersect with crazed, engineered status competitions. That means there's less authenticity in the social exploration that helps us find truth.

People are clustered into paranoia peer groups because then they can be more easily and predictably swayed. The clustering is automatic, sterile, and, as always, weirdly innocent. There wasn't anyone sitting in a tech company who decided to promote anti-vaccine rhetoric as a tactic. It could just as easily have

¹¹ <https://respectfulinsolence.com/2017/09/28/antivaxers-on-twitter-fake-news-and-twitter-bots/>

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertglatter/2017/12/23/bot-or-not-how-fake-social-media-accounts-can-jeopardize-your-health/>

been anti-hamster rhetoric. The only reason BUMMER reinforces the stuff is that paranoia turns out, as a matter of course, to be an efficient way of corralling attention.

The ability of humans to enjoy our modern luxuries, such as a diminution of deadly epidemics, while even temporarily rejecting the benefits of hard-won truths is a testament to how far we've come as a technological species. Some of us can briefly get away with assuming that people will be healthy without vaccinations, as if health were the natural state of affairs.

Public health measures and modern medicine have doubled our life spans. Doubled! The unintended result is that now some of us can believe nonsense and not pay for that belief with our lives. At least for a while.

In order to benefit in the long term as technology improves, we have to find a way to not let our improved comfort and security turn into cover for a lazy drift into perilous fantasy. Media forms that promote truth are essential for survival, but the dominant media of our age do no such thing.

I focused on this example because it upsets me as a parent; that's a deep level on which to be upset. It's maddening to drive through Silicon Valley and realize that many of my friends working behind all those green glass windows in the low-slung tech company buildings that reach to the horizon might be contributing to a process that's reviving once-defeated diseases in children.¹³

Save children; delete your accounts.

¹³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/04/06/anti-vaccine-movement-is-giving-diseases-a-2nd-life/7007955/>

ARGUMENT SIX

SOCIAL MEDIA IS DESTROYING YOUR CAPACITY FOR EMPATHY

This argument is the flip side of the argument about how social media makes you meaningless. Other people are also becoming meaningless; you understand less about what's going on with *them*.

Recall that Component C of BUMMER—Cramming experiences into your life—means that algorithms determine what you see. That means you don't know what other people are seeing, because Component C is calculating different results for them. You can't know how much the worldviews of *other* people are being biased and shaped by BUMMER. Personalized search, feeds, streams, and so on are at the root of this problem.

Suppose an old-time behaviorist placed a row of caged dogs in a lab, each dog getting treats or electric shocks, depending on what that dog just did. The experiment would work only if each dog got stimuli tied to that dog's specific behavior. If the wires were crossed, so that dogs were getting each other's stimuli, then the experiment would cease to function.

The same thing is true of people in a BUMMER platform.

The implications for people are even more profound than for dogs, however, because the people aren't in separate cages, and therefore rely crucially on *social perception*.

This means that we notice one another's reactions in order to help us each get our own bearings. If everyone around you is nervous about something, you will get nervous, too, because something must be going on. When everyone is relaxed, you'll tend to relax.

When I was a kid, a common prank was to go to a place where there were other people and simply start looking up at the sky. Soon everyone was looking up at the sky, even though there was nothing there.

A wonderful way to notice social perception is to travel to a country where you don't speak the language. You'll find that you are suddenly very attuned to what other people are doing and what they are paying attention to, because that's the only way to know what's going on. One time I noticed people in a jungle in Thailand paying attention to a certain direction, so I did too, just in time to get out of the way of speeding army jeeps that came out of nowhere. Social perception saved my life. It has always been part of how humanity has survived.

But when we're all seeing different, private worlds, then our cues to one another become meaningless. Our perception of actual reality, beyond the BUMMER platform, suffers.

There are many recent examples, such as the time a person fired a shot in a pizza parlor because of a frenzied online belief that a child sex ring was being run out of the basement.¹ There were false beliefs spread by social craziness before BUMMER, such as those that inspired the Salem witch hunts, but acute outbreaks were rarer than they are today. The speed, idiocy, and scale of false social perceptions have been amplified to the

¹ <https://www.snopes.com/pizzagate-conspiracy/>

point that people often don't seem to be living in the same world, the real world, anymore.

This is another one of those obvious problems that sneaked up on us. Public space lost dimension, but also commonality in general has been desiccated.

A thought experiment can help expose how weird our situation has become. Can you imagine if Wikipedia showed different versions of entries to each person on the basis of a secret data profile of that person? Pro-Trump visitors would see an article completely different from the one shown to anti-Trump people, but there would be no accounting of all that was different or why.

This might sound dystopian or bizarre, but it's similar to what you see in your BUMMER feed. Content is chosen and ads are customized to you, and you don't know how much has been changed for you, or why.

Another way to see the problem is to think about public spaces. If you share a space with people who aren't looking at their smartphones, you are all in that space together. You have a common base of experience. It can be an amazing feeling, and it's a big reason why people go to clubs, sports events, and houses of worship.

But when everyone is on their phone, you have less of a feeling for what's going on with them. Their experiences are curated by faraway algorithms. You and they can't build unmo-
lested commonality unless the phones are put away.

Traces of the old sharable world remain. You can watch the old-fashioned TV news that people like you watch, or that people who aren't like you watch. I don't like Fox News in the United States, for instance, because I think it's too paranoid, partisan, and cranky. But I watch it sometimes, and it helps me understand what other people who watch it are thinking and feeling. I cherish that ability.

I have no way of seeing your social media feed, however. I therefore have lessened powers to empathize with what you think and feel. We don't need to all see the same thing to understand each other. Only old-fashioned authoritarian regimes try to make everyone see the same thing. But we do need to be able to peek at what other people see.

Empathy² is the fuel that runs a decent society. Without it, only dry rules and competitions for power are left.

I might have been responsible for bringing the term "empathy" into high-tech marketing, because I started talking about VR as a tool for empathy back in the 1980s. I still believe that it's possible for tech to serve the cause of empathy. If a better future society involves better tech at all, empathy will be involved.

But BUMMER is precisely tuned to ruin the capacity for empathy.

DIGITALLY IMPOSED SOCIAL NUMBNESS

A common and correct criticism of BUMMER is that it creates "filter bubbles."³ Your own views are soothingly reinforced, except when you are presented with the most irritating versions of opposing views, as calculated by algorithms. Soothe or savage: whatever best keeps your attention.

You are drawn into a corral with other people who can be maximally engaged along with you as a group. BUMMER

² Here I am using the term "empathy" to mean an ability to understand what other people are experiencing and why; to imagine one being in another's place. The term can mean different things at different times. When it entered the English language about a century ago, it was originally meant to convey the way a person might imagine it would feel to be any other part of the universe, like a mountain or a grape, which were two examples from the earliest thought experiments; it was a term of art for the aesthetic and psychological premonitions of virtual reality. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/a-short-history-of-empathy/409912/>

³ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/309214/the-filter-bubble-by-elie-pariser/9780143121237/>

algorithms intrinsically gravitate toward corralling people into bubbles, because to engage a group is more effective and economical than to up engagement one person at a time.

(But, to review, the term should be “manipulate,” not “engage,” since it’s done in the service of unknown third parties who pay BUMMER companies to change your behavior. Otherwise, what are they paying for? What else could Facebook say it’s being paid tens of billions of dollars to do?)

On the face of it, filter bubbles are bad, because you see the world in tunnel vision. But are they really new? Surely there were damaging and annoying forms of exclusionary social communication that predate BUMMER, including the use of racist “dog whistles” in politics.

For example, in the 1988 American presidential election, politicians famously used the story of a black man named Willie Horton who had committed crimes after a prison furlough in order to evoke latent racism in the electorate. But in that case, everyone saw the same ad, so that you could at least get a sense of why someone else might have responded to it in a racist way, even if you strongly disagreed.

But now you don’t always get to see those racist ads. This is sometimes because of so-called dark ads, which show up in a person’s newsfeed even though they aren’t technically published as news.⁴ Many extremist political dark ads on Facebook only came to light as a result of forensic investigations of what happened in the 2016 elections.⁵ They were blatant and poisonous, and Facebook has announced plans to reduce their harm, though that policy is in flux as I write.

While no one outside Facebook—or maybe even inside

⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/31/facebook-dark-ads-can-swing-opinions-politics-research-shows>

⁵<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jaymcgregor/2017/07/31/why-facebook-dark-ads-arent-going-away/>

Facebook—knows how common or effective dark ads and similar messages have been,⁶ the most common form of online myopia is that most people can only make time to see what's placed in front of them by algorithmic feeds.

I fear the subtle algorithmic tuning of feeds more than I fear blatant dark ads. It used to be impossible to send customized messages to millions of people instantly. It used to be impossible to test and design multitudes of customized messages, based on detailed observation and feedback from unknowing people who are kept under constant surveillance.

It might turn out that a certain font around someone's portrait on a certain day makes a small percentage of people trust that person just a little less. Maybe the same font showed up in a popular video about an unpleasant topic that same day. No one will ever know why the font has the effect it does, though. It's all statistical.

The results are tiny changes in the behavior of people over time. But small changes add up, like compound interest.

This is one reason that BUMMER naturally promotes tribalism and is tearing society apart, even if the techies in a BUMMER company are well meaning. In order for BUMMER code to self-optimize, it naturally and automatically seizes upon any latent tribalism and racism, for these are the neural hashtags waiting out there in everyone's psyche, which can be accentuated for the purpose of attention monopoly. (I'll address this problem in more detail in the argument about how social media makes social improvement hopeless.)

Not only is your worldview distorted, but you have less awareness of other people's worldviews. You are banished from the experiences of the other groups being manipulated sepa-

⁶ <https://slate.com/technology/2018/02/no-a-study-did-not-claim-that-fake-news-on-facebook-didnt-affect-the-election.html>

rately. Their experiences are as opaque to you as the algorithms that are driving your experiences.

This is an epochal development. The version of the world you are seeing is invisible to the people who misunderstand you, and vice versa.

THE LOST THEORY IN YOUR BRAIN

The ability to theorize about what someone else experiences as part of understanding that person is called having a theory of mind. To have a theory of mind is to build a story in your head about what's going on in someone else's head. Theory of mind is at the core of any sense of respect or empathy, and it's a prerequisite to any hope of intelligent cooperation, civility, or helpful politics. It's why stories exist.

You've heard expressions like "Don't judge someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes." You can't understand people without knowing a little of what they've gone through.

Most animals get by without theory of mind, but people need it.

When you can only see how someone else behaves, but not the experiences that influenced their behavior, it becomes harder to have a theory of mind about that person. If you see someone hit someone else, for instance, but you did not see that they did it in defense of a child, you might misinterpret what you see.

In the same way, if you don't see the dark ads, the ambient whispers, the cold-hearted memes, and the ridicule-filled customized feed that someone else sees, that person will just seem crazy to you.

And that is our new BUMMER world. We seem crazy to each other, because BUMMER is robbing us of our theories of one another's minds.

Even when other people's experiences are candidly caught on camera, perhaps by a smartphone or a dashcam, BUMMER motivates enough noise to destroy commonality. BUMMER-driven opacity plays out online all the time. A video shows the moments before a police shooting, for instance, but BUMMER makes people upload endless versions of the video with different edits, overlays, and obfuscations. Empathy is lost to noise.

Trump supporters seem nuts to me, and they say liberals seem nuts to them. But it's wrong to say we've grown apart and can't understand each other. What's really going on is that we see less than ever before of what others are seeing, so we have less opportunity to understand each other.

Sure, you can monitor at least some of the typical content that other people are probably seeing. I keep up with conservative news sites, for instance. I always seek out personal contact with people who disagree with me if they're willing to give it a go.⁷ There's even a nice community on Reddit devoted to this quest,⁸ but it's drowned out by an ocean of chaotic poison.

The degree of difference between what is shown to someone else and what I can guess is being shown is itself unknowable. The opacity of our times is even worse than it might be because the degree of opacity is itself opaque. I remember when the internet was supposed to bring about a transparent society. The reverse has happened.

⁷ Since I live in Berkeley, my town is periodically invaded by alt-right people who want to demonstrate. What astounds me is that several times men with conservative bumper stickers on their pickups have thrown nasty looks at me and my family, and they know nothing about us. Once, one of them swerved in a mock "Maybe I'll run you over" moment. If I could know what that driver had seen, then I would have a chance at empathy. It might be possible to talk. BUMMER has robbed us of that possibility.

⁸ <https://www.wired.com/story/free-speech-issue-reddit-change-my-view/>

ARGUMENT NINE

SOCIAL MEDIA IS MAKING POLITICS IMPOSSIBLE

ARC BURN¹

There used to be a moral arc to history, pointed out by Martin Luther King Jr.; justice got broader over time. In one period, slaves were freed; in another women got the vote; in another LGBTQ people gained rights and respect. Democracy spread to more and more countries.

Just recently, in the age of BUMMER, the arc is showing signs of crashing to the ground and burning. There are not just backlashes as we climb the arc, but unthinkable, catastrophic falls.

In recent years Turkey, Austria, the United States, India,

¹This is a chapter about politics. Before going any further, I have to say something obvious. This is a vital topic and I've seen a side of it you probably haven't, so I want to tell you about that. At the same time, I'm a white techie, but in order to proceed I must talk about things I can't know as well as I know my own world, like the black experience in America. I'm probably going to fall into the traps of whitesplaining, mansplaining, techsplaining, or other forms of 'splaining. Can we just stipulate that that's true? I'm sure it is. Please take what you can use from me. I know I don't know everything.

and other democracies have elected authoritarian-leaning leaders who rely on tribalism for their power. Voters are choosing to negate themselves. In each case, BUMMER played a prominent role. I hope, dearly, that our times will be remembered as a momentary glitch in a previously smooth progression toward a more democratic world.

But for the moment we face a terrifying, sudden crisis. Before the BUMMER era, the general thinking was that once a country went democratic, it not only stayed that way but would become ever more democratic, because its people would demand that.

Unfortunately, that stopped being true, and only recently.² Something is drawing young people away from democracy. Despite all the hopeful self-congratulations from social media companies, it seems that when democracy has been weakened, the online world has just gotten ugly and deceitful.

The correlation might be even stronger in developing regions. Simple access to information technology, like the ability to send texts with phones, has probably contributed to the marvelous and historic reduction in abject poverty around the world in the past few decades. But more recently, commercial social media showed up, and phones turned into propagators of maniacal social violence.

One of the world's great human rights catastrophes—unfolding as I write—is the plight of the Rohingya population of Myanmar. As it turns out, this crisis corresponded to the arrival of Facebook, which was quickly inundated by shitposts aimed at the Rohingya.³ At the same time, viral lies about child abductions, in that case mostly on Facebook's WhatsApp,

² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/millennials-are-rapidly-losing-interest-in-democracy/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/29/business/facebook-misinformation-abroad.html>

have destabilized parts of India.⁴ According to a United Nations report, social media is also a massively deadly weapon, literally, in South Sudan—because of shitposts.⁵

Mysterious authors flood social media feeds with bizarre claims of wrongdoing—variations of the blood libel—supposedly perpetrated by a targeted group. Memes to stimulate genocide often report something horrible that is said to have been done to children. As always with BUMMER, the nastiest, most paranoid messaging gets the most attention, and emotions spiral out of control as a byproduct of engagement spiraling out of control.

All of these regions had problems before. History is filled with weird, bad, or crazy politicians. It is also filled with mass hysterias and violent mob delusions. And countries that fail. Are we really in exceptional times?

It will only be possible for future historians to make that call. It seems to me that something has gone bad and dark in our world, and suddenly so, just in recent years, with the arrival of BUMMER. It's not that we're seeing unprecedented horrors—they have precedents—but that the precious arc of improvement has reversed. We're backsliding terribly and suddenly.

A typical story of social media in politics goes like this: A group of hip, young, educated people gets into a social media platform first, because these things come out of the hip, young, educated world. They're idealistic. They might be liberal, conservative, or anything. They sincerely want the world to be better. That goes for both the techies who make a BUMMER platform and the people out in the world who use it.

⁴https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/indias-millions-of-new-internet-users-are-falling-for-fake-news%E2%80%94sometimes-with-deadly-consequences/2017/10/01/f078eace-9f7f-11e7-8ed4-a750b67c552b_story.html

⁵http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_963.pdf

They meet early successes, often spectacular, ecstatic successes, but then the world turns sour, as if by magic. BUMMER ultimately fuels loudmouthed assholes and con artists more than it does the initial groups of hip, young, educated idealists, because in the longer term BUMMER is more suited to sneaky, malevolent manipulation than to any other purpose.

BUMMER studies early idealists and catalogs their quirks by its very nature, without an evil plan. The results have the unintended effect of lining idealists up so that they can be targeted with shitposts that statistically make them just a little more irritable, a little less able to communicate with dissimilar people, so a little more isolated, and after all that, a little less able to tolerate moderate or pragmatic politics.

BUMMER undermines the political process and hurts millions of people, but so many of those very same people are so addicted that all they can do is praise BUMMER because they can use it to complain about the catastrophes it just brought about. It's like Stockholm syndrome or being tied to an abusive relationship by invisible ropes. The sweet, early idealists lose, all the time thanking BUMMER for how it makes them feel and how it brought them together.

ARAB SPRING

The Arab Spring was an occasion for hearty self-congratulation in Silicon Valley. We claimed it as our glory at the time. "Facebook Revolution" and "Twitter Revolution" were common tropes back then.⁶

We gathered in front of big screens watching kids in Tahrir

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html>

Square in Cairo taking on a despotic government and we were in love. We celebrated as ordinary citizens used social media to tell NATO forces where to target air strikes. Social media put a modern army at the fingertips of ordinary social media users.

There had been revolutions before, but something was different this time.

There wasn't any particular charismatic figure, for instance. There was no George Washington or Vladimir Lenin. Here, we thought, was a revolution truly of the people. There were no generals hunched over big tables with maps as underlings scurried around them. There was no unifying manifesto, no general agreement or even particularly focused discussion about what would come after the revolution. The term "democracy" was thrown around, but there was little discussion about what it meant. Democracy was confused with a thin faith that online collective dynamics would lead to a better world. A self-organized revolution could do no wrong. Here, we thought, was the realization of our faith in networks.

I wasn't so sure. Some of my friends got pissed at me when I asked, "Where are those kids going to get jobs?" Or even worse, "Is Twitter or Facebook going to get those kids jobs?" I also complained that a revolution belonged to those accomplishing it, and it was wrong to bring in the brand names of Silicon Valley companies.

Well, no one got them jobs, and indeed no one was around to coherently claim power in Egypt other than theocratic extremists, who were then ousted by a military coup, and almost none of the inspiring young people who protested have decent jobs.

What social media did at that time, and what it always does, is create illusions: that you can improve society by wishes alone; that the sanest people will be favored in cutting contests; and that somehow material well-being will just take care of itself.

What actually happens, always, is that the illusions fall apart when it is too late, and the world is inherited by the crudest, most selfish, and least informed people. Anyone who isn't an asshole gets hurt the most.

So I was the cynic, but it turned out I wasn't even close to being cynical enough. No one wants to associate their tech company brand with what happened next.

There had been reactions against revolutions before, as well as hijacking of revolutions, corruptions of revolutions, reigns of terror, and many other dysfunctions. But something was different this time.

A widespread phenomenon of networked nihilistic terror exploded.⁷ Young people were watching the most awful, sadistic videos, channeled to them by Silicon Valley companies, and the dynamic was like porn. Kids became addicted to atrocity. That had certainly happened all too often before, but in the past it had been organized. Gangs had ruled history's many killing fields, but now, loners were "self-radicalizing."

A lonely male persona became familiar, strutting in a made-up world, bounded by the pettiest of illusions, filled with insecure rage.

But Silicon Valley's faith in social media as a tool for social improvement was not even tarnished. It still lives in me. As I write, on New Year's Day 2018, the Iranian regime is blocking social media to suppress protests erupting around the country. An inner voice in me rises up: "Yes! Yes, online technology is helping people organize and they'll be clever enough to route around attempts to shut them out."

I don't want to give up that hope. None of us do. But the evidence thus far is not encouraging.

⁷ <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>

GAMERGATE

I was heartened when women started to speak up in the gaming community. The gaming world is wonderful in a lot of ways, but it really isn't meeting its potential. Gaming should be turning into the new way we learn and talk about complicated issues. That's happening to a small extent, but the biggest productions tend to target the same demographic over and over again. You've got guns, you're traversing terrain, and you're shooting at something. Over and over. The industry needs to spread its wings more.

Developers who thought gaming should broaden in this way made use of social media to communicate their ideas, and created a vibrant, distributed movement. They earned attention and you could feel the atmosphere shift a little. Many of those developers were female.

What happened next was a rich-world version of what had happened with the Arab Spring. The reaction was astonishingly extreme and ugly, of a different order than the thing it was reacting against.

Women who talked about gaming were attacked in vicious ways that have since become terribly normal. They were bombarded with fake images of themselves and their families being murdered, raped, and so on.⁸ Their personal details were posted, forcing some women to go into hiding.⁹

The movement to destroy critics of the gaming world was called "Gamergate." It's impossible to talk to anyone who supports it, because they live in an alternate universe of conspiracy

⁸ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4858216/Victim-Gamergate-s-horrific-online-abuse-reveals-trauma.html>

⁹ <http://time.com/3923651/meet-the-woman-helping-gamergate-victims-come-out-of-the-shadows/>

theories and dense jungles of stupid arguments fueled by the pettiest of illusions, bursting with insecure rage.

Gamergate became a feeder and model for the alt-right.¹⁰

LGBTQ

In the years immediately before the 2016 election in the United States, laws around LGBTQ issues started to change. Same-sex marriage was legalized, trans people were more out and accepted. Social media undoubtedly played a role.

But that was only the first stage in the process of BUMMER degradation. That was the BUMMER honeymoon. Well-meaning people won a historically smooth round in the fight, and it felt as if any level of improvement in society you could dream of was in easy reach.

It's like a heroin high, as that has been described to me; an incredible, easy, early burst of ecstasy, after which you're inevitably going down, catastrophically.

The next stage in BUMMER politics is the one in which assholes realize they're favored by BUMMER. All kinds of assholes appear. They get enough attention to outpace the well-meaning people who just won victories. They exhume horrible prejudices and hatreds that haven't seen the light of day for years, and they make those hatreds mainstream.

Then it turns out that even bigger assholes manipulate the early-adopter assholes. Then big bad things start to happen. Horrific, giant assholes get elected, stupid xenophobic projects are elevated, ordinary people suffer horrible, needless material losses, and wars loom.

In the case of the United States, astonishingly extreme

¹⁰ <http://www.zero-books.net/books/kill-all-normies>

anti-LGBTQ figures were elevated to the highest offices¹¹ even though LGBTQ dignity and rights issues were untouchable in terms of argument during the election itself.

It's not that BUMMER disfavors LGBTQ people. BUMMER could care less. It's that it favors con artists and assholes. These are Components A and F, the wind in BUMMER's sails.

NEITHER LEFT NOR RIGHT, BUT DOWN

BUMMER is neither liberal nor conservative; it is just pro-paranoia, pro-irritability, and pro-general assholiness.

Remember, BUMMER isn't that way *at first*. At first, nice early-adopter people seem to get a boost. However, once those nice people have been categorized, algorithmically probed and tested, and readied for manipulation, *then* the assholes take over.

Who cares if I myself am liberal? If you are a principled conservative, do you think you've really been well served by BUMMER? My evangelical Christian conservative friends suddenly find themselves wedged into social media communities that support an obscene, cruel philanderer and abuser who made fortunes from gambling and bankruptcies and who has stated, on the record, that he doesn't need or seek forgiveness from God.¹² Meanwhile my patriotic, hawkish conservative friends now find themselves aligned with a leader who would almost certainly not be in office were it not for cynical, illegal interventions by a hostile foreign power. Look what BUMMER has done to your conservatism.

The same thing happens to liberals. Remember Bernie Bros? Remember how it became cool in some liberal circles to cruelly

¹¹ <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/08/trump-on-god-hopefully-i-wont-have-to-be-asking-for-much-forgiveness/>

ridicule Hillary, as if doing so were a religion? In the age of BUMMER you can't tell what was organic and what was engineered.¹³

It's random that BUMMER favored the Republicans over the Democrats in U.S. politics, but it isn't random that BUMMER favored the most irritable, authoritarian, paranoid, and tribal Republicans.¹⁴ All those qualities are equally available on the left. If a U.S. version of Hugo Chavez had come along, he could have been president. Maybe it will happen in the future. Yuck.

As a lefty, I don't think a BUMMER-style lefty leader would be any better than Trump. Debasement is debasement, whatever direction it comes from.

The ways that a "disaster artist" candidate can be preferred by Facebook are well known, though the details remain opaque. When a candidate, or any other customer, buys access to user attention through Facebook, the amount of access isn't just determined by how much is spent, but by how well Facebook's algorithms determine the customer is *also* promoting and increasing the use of Facebook. People who worked on the social media strategy of the Trump campaign have claimed¹⁵ that Trump gained *hundreds of times* more access¹⁶ for a given spend than did the Clinton campaign, though Facebook claims that wasn't so, without revealing enough to make the story transparent.¹⁷ If there *was* a multiplier, it probably applied as much to Russian

¹³ <https://www.rawstory.com/2017/03/russians-used-bernie-bros-as-unwitting-agents-in-disinformation-campaign-senate-intel-witness/>

¹⁴ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/2/24/17047880/conservatives-amplified-russian-trolls-more-often-than-liberals>

¹⁵ <https://www.wired.com/story/how-trump-conquered-facebook-without-russian-ads/>

¹⁶ Brad Parscale, the Trump campaign's social media director, tweeted: "I bet we were 100x to 200x her. We had CPMs that were pennies in some cases. This is why @realDonaldTrump was a perfect candidate for FaceBook."

¹⁷ <https://slate.com/technology/2018/03/did-facebook-really-charge-clinton-more-for-ads-than-trump.html>

operatives and other pro-Trump parties buying access on Facebook as to the Trump campaign making direct purchases. The algorithms can't care and don't care.

An interesting detail that came out a year after the election is that Facebook had offered both the Clinton and Trump campaigns onsite teams to help them maximize their use of the platform, but only Trump's campaign accepted the offer.¹⁸ Maybe if Clinton had agreed to have Facebook employees in her office, she would have won. The election was so close that any little thing that moved the needle in her direction could have tipped the result.

Facebook and other BUMMER companies are becoming the ransomware of human attention. They have such a hold on so much of so many people's attention for so much of each day that they are gatekeepers to brains.

The situation reminds me of the medieval practice of indulgences, in which the Catholic Church of the time would sometimes demand money for a soul to enter heaven. Indulgences were one of the main complaints that motivated Protestants to split off. It's as if Facebook is saying, "Pay us or you don't exist."

They're becoming the existential mafia.

BLACK LIVES MATTER

After a dramatic series of awful killings of unarmed black citizens by police in the United States, the initial reaction from sympathetic social media users was for the most part wise, stoic, and constructive. It must be said that we might not even have heard much about these killings, their prevalence, or their similarities without social media.

¹⁸ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/facebook-embeds-russia-and-the-trump-campaigns-secret-weapon/>

At first, social media engendered a universal sense of community. The slogan “Black Lives Matter” initially struck me as remarkably knowing and careful, for instance. Not a curse, not a swipe. Just a reminder: our children matter. I suspect that a lot of people got the same impression, even though many of them would come to ridicule the same slogan not long after.

“Black Lives Matter” appeared and gained prominence during the typical honeymoon phase of BUMMER activism, and, as always, that early phase was hopeful and felt substantial. BUMMER was giving black activists a new channel to influence and power. More money and power for the BUMMER companies, for sure, but also more empowerment for new armies of BUMMER users. Win/win, right?

But during that same honeymoon, behind the scenes, a deeper, more influential power game was gearing up. The game that mattered most was out of sight, occurring in algorithmic machinery in huge hidden data centers around the world.

Black activists and sympathizers were carefully cataloged and studied. What wording got them excited? What annoyed them? What little things, stories, videos, anything, kept them glued to BUMMER? What would snowflake-ify them enough to isolate them, bit by bit, from the rest of society? What made them shift to be more targetable by behavior modification messages over time? The purpose was not to repress the movement but to earn money. The process was automatic, routine, sterile, and ruthless.

Meanwhile, automatically, black activism was tested for its ability to preoccupy, annoy, even transfix other populations, who themselves were then automatically cataloged, prodded, and studied. A slice of latent white supremacists and racists who had previously not been well identified, connected, or empowered was blindly, mechanically discovered and cultivated, initially only for automatic, unknowing commercial gain—but

that would have been impossible without first cultivating a slice of BUMMER black activism and algorithmically figuring out how to frame it as a provocation.

BUMMER was gradually separating people into bins and promoting assholes by its nature, before Russians or any other client showed up to take advantage. When the Russians did show up, they benefited from a user interface designed to help “advertisers” target populations with tested messages to gain attention. All the Russian agents had to do was pay BUMMER for what came to BUMMER naturally.

“Black Lives Matter” became more prominent as a provocation and object of ridicule than as a cry for help. Any message can be reframed to incite a given population if message vandals follow the winds of the algorithms. Components F and A, locked together.

Meanwhile, racism became organized over BUMMER to a degree it had not been in generations.

I wish I didn’t have to acknowledge this heartbreak. A lot of what goes on *at a user-to-user level* in BUMMER is wonderful if you look at it while ignoring the bigger picture in which people are being manipulated *by* BUMMER. If you can draw a small enough frame to include only the stuff that people are directly aware of on BUMMER, then it often looks exquisite.

Black Twitter is a great example. It’s a distinct medium and literature onto itself. Black Twitter is marvelously inventive and expressive. And virtuosic. Black Twitter has run rings around Trump, such as after the “NFL kneeling scandal.” Meanwhile, the stuff outside of a Twitter user’s frame of awareness is intensely favored to continue to subsume Black Twitter and make it powerless.

I want to celebrate Black Twitter because it’s brilliant. But I need to point out it’s a cruel trap. Something similar to Black Twitter will hopefully exist someday that isn’t subservient to

BUMMER and won't be fundamentally designed to secretly study people in order to manipulate them.

I want to be wrong about all this stuff, but so far BUMMER looks worse and worse as more is revealed.

A year after the election, the truth started to trickle out. It turns out that some prominent "black" activist accounts were actually fake fronts for Russian information warfare. Component F. The Russian purpose was apparently to irritate black activists enough to lower enthusiasm for voting for Hillary. To suppress the vote, statistically.

That doesn't mean that Russians placed thoughts into people's heads in any clear or reliable way. It doesn't mean that the people targeted by these campaigns were any less thoughtful, intelligent, or strong-willed than anyone else. Most of what happened was probably the "redlined" promotion of cynicism, a dismissive attitude, and a sense of hopelessness ("redlining" refers to a sneaky way that U.S. banks historically biased creditworthiness algorithms to disfavor black neighborhoods). I am not saying that critiques of Hillary were invalid, or that voter sentiment was uninformed; I am saying that voter emotion was tweaked just a bit, enough to lower voter turnout.

Don't forget that Facebook had already noisily published research proving it can change voter turnout.¹⁹ In the published research, Facebook used the cheerful example of boosting voter turnout. But since Facebook is all about targeting and can calculate your political affiliation, among many other things,²⁰ and since it has also proven it can make people sad,²¹ it is likely that social networks can also be used to suppress

¹⁹ <http://www.nature.com/news/facebook-experiment-boosts-us-voter-turnout-1.11401>

²⁰ <http://dailycaller.com/2016/08/24/facebook-is-determining-your-political-affiliation-tracks-your-activity/>

²¹ <http://www.pnas.org/content/111/24/8788.full>

voters who have been targeted because of how they are likely to vote.

None of this means that Facebook prefers one kind of voter to another. That's up to Facebook's customers, who are not you, the users. Facebook doesn't necessarily know what's going on. A social media company is in a better position if it doesn't know what's going on, because then it makes just as much money, but with less culpability.

We will never know what algorithmic tests took place in the service of voter suppression or activation in any particular election, or what lessons were learned. Maybe certain words in headlines, or placement of certain ads adjacent to certain celebrity news, turned out to improve the chances of making someone irritable, but only if they liked certain cars.

All we can surmise is that a statistically driven enterprise adapted continuously in order to optimize its performance.

Neither BUMMER nor Russian agents had to care about actual black activism, one way or another. (As it happens, the individuals who work at BUMMER companies tend to be liberal and are probably mostly sympathetic to black activism, but that's utterly irrelevant to their effect upon the world so long as they adhere to the mass manipulation business model.)

BUMMER makes more money when people are irritated and obsessed, divided and angry—and that suited Russian interests perfectly. BUMMER is a shit machine. It transforms sincere organizing into cynical disruption. It's inherently a cruel con game.

Black activists have every reason to feel good about their immediately perceptible interactions on BUMMER; there is genuine beauty and depth on that level. This other behind-the-scenes game doesn't make the visible game invalid. The only way in which looking at the whole picture matters is in observing and understanding the ultimate results.

Activists might feel confident they are getting their message out, but it is indisputable that black activists have severely lost ground politically, materially, and in every way that matters outside of BUMMER.

As usual, after an algorithmically prompted catastrophe, many of the people who have been betrayed and used like fools can only praise BUMMER.

One example of Component F in the 2016 U.S. election was an account called Blacktivist, which was run by the Russians. A year after the elections, the true power behind Blacktivist was revealed and reporters asked genuine black activists what they thought about it.²² Some, fortunately, still had access to outrage. One activist reportedly said, “They are using our pain for their gain. I’m profoundly disgusted.” That is an informed, reasonable statement, and a brave one, for it is not easy to accept that one has been tricked.

People tend to rationalize. For instance, a civil rights attorney told the same reporter, “If someone is organizing an event that benefits accountability and justice, I don’t really care what their motives are or who they are.” This is a typical rationalization from someone who does not look outside the frame of familiar experience at the larger picture where the game of BUMMER is played out.

At the end of the day, BUMMER moneymaking caused black social media to unintentionally elevate a new tool optimized for voter suppression. As if there weren’t enough voter suppression tools out there already. As if gerrymandering, inaccessible polling stations, and biased registration rules weren’t enough.

A lot of potential Hillary voters were infused with a not-great

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/21/russia-social-media-activism-blacktivist>

feeling about Hillary, or about voting at all. Were you one of them? If so, please think back. Were you seeing any information customized for you before the election? Did you use Twitter or Facebook? Did you do a lot of online searches?

You were had. You were tricked. Your best intentions were turned against you.

IF ONLY THIS GAME WERE ALREADY OVER

Even if the current atmosphere—our hell of insults and lies—has started to seem normal,²³ it really wasn't like this before. I worry about young people growing up in our mess and believing this is how things always are.

While I was writing this book, a new social movement known as #metoo arose, announcing a rejection of sexual harassment of women. BUMMER algorithms are devouring everything about #metoo right now, as I type. How can it be turned into fuel to empower some asshole somewhere to annoy someone else in order to make everyone more engaged/manipulated? How will activists be goaded into becoming less sympathetic? What prospects will be discovered by manipulator/advertisers who are trawling/trolling to find ways to ruin the world?²⁴

²³ Italian voters have favored a political party that has NO quality other than being BUMMER through and through: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/world/europe/italy-election-davide-casaleggio-five-star.html>.

²⁴ Shortly before this book went to the printer, a horrifying school shooting took place at a high school in Florida, and BUMMER was right there, as it always is, probing for ways to damage society: <https://www.wired.com/story/pro-gun-russian-bots-flood-twitter-after-parkland-shooting/>.