The 2018 Facebook Data Controversy and Technological Alienation

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INTRODUCTION

The controversy surrounding the way in which data was obtained and used by a private corporation, Cambridge Analytica, in connection with the US Presidential election of 2016 begs a series of questions and points to the critical connection between Big Data and a variety of fundamental human imperatives such as privacy and freedom of expression amongst others (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). This chapter uses the issues surrounding the controversy as a point of departure to explore two related issues – first the way in which the "technologically alienated" individual makes technological decisions without being mindful of the consequences of the technological choices and secondly the way in which the alienation can be utilized to obtain detailed information from the structured and unstructured data that makes up the gigantic corpus of Big Data.

The key to the controversy was the fact that a corporation was able to collect information from individuals in a manner where the people of whom data was collected felt that they were unaware of the fact that their data was being collected. What happens after that is important, but the goal of this essay is to examine the claim by individuals, and their representatives that the data collection happened in a surreptitious manner. While, this essay is not meant to condone what happened, but it is to offer an alternative argument that places a great deal of responsibility on individual users of digital systems. It is useful to consider the notion of alienation in this context.

BACKGROUND

Alienation From Technology

The notion of alienation has been a key philosophical construct in thinking of people in societies. The notion of alienation has been a focus of study from many different perspectives. For example, the approaches taken by political economist Karl Marx and by the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud have been some of the more well-known perspectives on the idea of alienation. In the works of Marx[1] and Freud[2] there was the common theme that alienation involved the distancing between two entities. Thus, Marx argued that the practice of capitalism produces a distance between the laborer and the product of his or her labor. Specifically, Marx was concerned about the way in which the laborer is separated from the profit that is gleaned from the work of the laborer. Working in a time period similar to Marx, Freud, on the other hand, took a different approach to alienation because not only was Freud not interested in a political

economic theory but also there was no great urgency in Freud's analysis on reducing alienation. For Freud, alienation was essentially the natural split between the conscious and the subconscious aspects of the human mind, and from the psychoanalytic perspective of alienation, was a part of the evolutionary process of being human and there was no specific question of overcoming this alienation. To Freud, humans were expected to live with a certain degree of alienation which was internal to the human being and an essential part of life. While Marx and Freud have been the two key scholars who have historically been connected with the idea of alienation, others like Erich From[3] and Emile Durkheim[4] have also used and developed notions of alienation to underscore the distance between the human being and society. In most cases the focus has been on identifying the factors that cause the alienation and then finding mechanisms for reducing the alienation to an acceptable level. Eventually, the notion of alienation actually remains a very well-examined notion in psychology, philosophy, politics, and related disciplines and in most cases the emphasis has been on the ways in which the human being is being distanced from events around him or her. In much of the discussions about alienation, thinkers have tried to find ways to reduce the extent of alienation. The desire to reduce the sense of distance between the individual and the surroundings, particularly when alienation is triggered by external forces, is motivated by the fact that the outcome of alienation can be fundamentally painful to the individual. To feel that one is distanced from the surrounding, or to feel unfamiliar and unacknowledged can be a debilitating experience. The sense of loss of control that can emanate being disempowered has been the focus of discussions in politics and economy for a long time and attempts have been made to understand why alienation occurs and how it can be overcome. No wonder, alienation has received so much attention because it is considered to be an unpleasant and abnormal condition because of the uncertainty and anxiety it can produce. Most of the scholars would argue that to be alienated is essentially an uncomfortable feeling.

While this brief review of the understanding of alienation draws from the traditional understanding of the notion of alienation, I use and expand on the idea of alienation to primarily refer to the idea of distancing (Mitra, 2010). To me the notion of alienation is one that produces a distance between the human being and a specific phenomenon. Specifically, the notion of alienation when considered with respect to technology can be considered as follows:

In most cases, the more sophisticated the individual thinks the technology is, the greater is the alienation of the individual from the technology. Within this relationship between technology and alienation the idea of sophistication is two-pronged. On one hand is the measurable sophistication of a tool going, for instance, from the primitive bow and arrow to the Kalashnikov, and on the other hand is the perceived sophistication of the technology, in terms of how the user thinks about the technology. The latter refers to what the individual thinks about a tool often with limited understanding of the tool. Both these aspects of sophistication play a part in the process of alienation but often operate in different ways since the loci of these two forms of sophistication are in different places – in the technology and in the individual. It can be argued that the perception of sophistication is partly based in the level of knowledge the individual has about a specific technology. A technology can appear sophisticated simply because the person using does not know much about the technology and that ignorance creates the aura of heightened sophistication and increased alienation (Mitra, 2012).

The distance can remain unrecognizable and thus unexplored unless an explicit attempt is made to understand the nature of the alienation. Thus, in the analysis that follows in this essay, I am interested in tracing the nature of alienation between people and the technologies that surround them. In the cur-

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