

Is the Internet Good or Bad?

Yes.

Zeynep Tufekci

CITP, Princeton University

SILS and Sociology, University of North Carolina

@techsoc or zst@princeton.edu



The War of the Anecdotes

- Arab Spring or «Patients Like Me»
- Neonazis and Anti-vaccination Groups
- War of examples



Is the Internet Good or Bad

- Wrong question
- Answer is «Yes»
- The real question is: how?



Need to distinguish

- Affordances of the medium
- The channels of impact
- The social mechanisms through which they operate



Affordances -

laws of physics versus laws of bits

- Spatial (physics: bounded)
- Temporal (physics: ephemeral)
- Computational (physics: cognitive processes)



Spatial

- **Connectivity**
 - Horizontal and otherwise
- **Assembly**
 - New organizational forms (wiki, email list, Facebook group)



Temporal

- Persistence
- Multiplex temporality
 - - time-shifting (asynchronous)
 - - immediate (skype)
 - - mixed (Twitter, IM)



Computational

- Random Access
- Search
- Trends
- News Feed
- Pagerank



Channels

- Social. (Hint: We are not cats)
- Informational
- Computational and Algorithmic



Social Mechanisms

- Homophily/Clumping
- Polarization/Distancing
- Bridging and Remixing
- Visibility/Optics
- Pluralistic Ignorance (Public is a Meta-Concept)
- Attention Pathways
- Remixing the Public/Private spheres
- Collective Action



Homophily

- Birds of a feather flock together
- In offline world, happens through agency and structure
 - Clubs, interest groups
 - Neighborhoods and universities
- Online:
 - Less place-bound
 - Different balance between achieved (rather than ascribed) dimensions
 - Rather than class or neighborhood, your interests



Homophily and Counterpublics

- Good or Bad?
 - Arab Spring
 - Anti-Vaccination



Polarization and Distancing

- In-group / out-group is basic human social feature
- Groups drift *away* from the middle



Polarization. Good or Bad?

- Isolating open racism
- Post-Arab Spring Egypt, US politics



Bridging and Remixing

- Hub People, translators, cosmopolitans
- Opportunities are exponential



Bridging? Good or Bad?

- «We Love Iranians»
- No more dog whistling – someone will tell.



Visibility and Optics

- Things lost to time and space now persist
- Things that always were but rarely seen



Is It Always Better to See?

- Anti-Bullying
- Yazidi bombings



Pluralistic Ignorance

- Public is a meta-concept
- It's not what I know, but what I know others know



Preference revelation leads to..?

- Revolution
- #unbonjuit



Attention Pathways

- Attention is at the heard of politics and much else
- Attention and mass media conflated because they were intertwined.
- Novel pathways



Non-Mass Media Production of Attention

- Social media «micro-celebrity» activists
- Star Wars kid
- #Kony2012



Remixing the Public and the Private

- Facebook and context collapse
- «Cute Cat Theory»
- Farrell: «Labile Communication»
- Gender implications
- Gate-keeping and gate-crashing



Public-Private Remixing

- Terminally ill children
- The «overshare»
- New counter-publics



Collective Action

- How do humans ever act together?
 - Coordination
 - Information
 - Social pressure
 - Free-rider



Changing Face of Collective Action

- Arab Spring
- Anti-Vaccination



Is the Internet Good or Bad?

- Yes
- Thank you!

@techsoc

zst@princeton.edu