



A sleepwalker's guide to social media

by Tony D. Sampson, Polity, Cambridge, 2020, 207 pp., Paperback \$24.95,
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BOOK REVIEW

A sleepwalker's guide to social media, by Tony D. Sampson, Polity, Cambridge, 2020, 207 pp., Paperback \$24.95, ISBN 9781509537419

In light of recent US current events that saw a domestic terrorist attack by the far right on the day of President Biden's electoral vote confirmation at Capitol Hill, Tony Sampson's *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media* is right on time. The hatred that followed widespread false claims about the latest US elections and enabled the offline violent actions at Capitol Hill can be analyzed through the topics and concepts proposed by the book around experience, feelings and virality of fake news online. Even when they make a dense reading, the author takes the readers by the hand and walks them through the book to ensure that the main concepts are properly delineated. This book offers an interdisciplinary insight that fills the knowledge gap and connects some of the latest events concerning online (and offline) environments and users' behavior through diverse lenses.

A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media aims to be a book about user experience. It is divided into five main chapters, making room for an introduction, an outro, and two entr'acte – *coda* and *segue* – where there is a reflection on real-life examples from the work related to the topics of the book, like emotional shock events and how the spread of fake news is dealt with in more and less privileged areas of the world in the aftermath of those events. In the book, the author concentrates on the collective and nonconscious traits enabled by online platforms. From this perspective, the author proposes an analysis of what they call the somnambulists, described as someone whose condition of 'neither asleep nor awake' is exploited by corporations and platforms for profit.

In the introduction, the author proposes using the musical elements of refrains and lines of flight as metaphors to convey the birth and consolidation of certain behavior on social media platforms. Sampson links the musical improvisation guided by lines of flight with the refusal to conform on social media, the need to be an individual among countless streams of data. On the other hand, the refrain represents the repeated rhythm and patterns of behavior found on social media, that allow to categorize users more easily in boxes, forcing them to experience similar contents.

The first chapter develops around the features of the modern world that define and enable the current era of 'post-truth': a time in which truth is overwhelmed by a social media environment that encourages rumors and conspiracies, complicating the cognitive processes humans use to distinguish a lie from the truth. The author offers a rich summary of Baudrillard's thesis on post-truth and representation, to refute that more transparent and abundant information leads to less mis- and disinformation. The author also uses this summary to argue that sophisticated cognitive critical skills are not sufficient to obtain digital literacy skills that shield from fake news. Sampson argues that *shock events* are what facilitate the spread of fake news. This happens by design through the exploitation of data voids and carefully studied SEO strategies. Data voids occur when search engines do not have enough results to give back to a query, hence emotionally charged shock events tend to fill that space quickly and cause search engines to amplify the narration of those events. SEO techniques instead can turn news into highly indexed material, resulting in them being at the top of search results. Finally, shock events enable immediate emotional responses in users, who will not take the time to filter through the quality of results yielded by search engines, thus making

disinformation subject to further amplification and manipulation. In their argument, the benign or malicious nature of the content that fills online spaces also depends on which party is producing it.

The second chapter introduces the metaphor of the somnambulist. The focus is on the role that emotional shocks play in a context of collective unconscious, and what the consequences of the shock mean for users' identity online. Further, the chapter focuses on former President Donald Trump's role in enabling fake news virality through his strong presence on Twitter. The emphasis of this chapter is on framing users as subjects that act as somnambulists when confronted with tools of mass persuasion linked to emotional events online. The collective unconscious that emerges from the behavior of users online is the target of manipulation, not users per se. Fake news become appealing because they ask to disregard doubts suggested by logic in favor of a more visceral sentiment that seem to explain false facts rationally.

In *coda*, the reader has the chance to briefly explore examples of offline events triggered by emotional turmoil online: Christchurch mass shooting and El Paso racist terror attack. *Segue* is a cue to reflect on those events, as it briefly discusses what type of infrastructures are deployed in different parts of the world to counteract social media content virality. It briefly compares methods of acting against the spread of fake news in two different areas of the world: in the United Kingdom, white papers are brought forward to discuss an increase of AI decisions over flagged online content; in the Philippines, poorly paid workers become moderators of graphic and harmful content by having to look at it incessantly.

Chapter three focuses on the critique of digital marketing practices adopted by social media platforms to successfully obtain virality and growth. The emphasis is on how the 'dark refrain' mentioned in the introduction is tied to attention economy techniques, facilitating the virality and the amount of harmful content through the identification of *lookalike audiences*. Sampson also points out that online platforms have little incentive to put a stop to this toxic combination because allowing hate to spread benefits them financially. The chapter offers an insight on the role of corporate research jobs: much of the research that results in the application of digital marketing models does not undergo rigorous ethical clearance, but researchers are drawn to it because of the immediately tangible results and recognition.

Chapter four discusses ways to create immunity for users against virality and growth practices linked to disinformation and misinformation, presenting three propositions. The first one recognizes that automated and human moderators are not enough to identify and eradicate the issue: the former is subject to racial bias by design, the latter exposes more individuals to the problem at hand. The push is to work towards an infrastructure that can act in real time, with a better approach towards biases and hate speech, though it would mean less profit for platforms. The second proposition urges to act against the far-right narrative that thrives on hate and fear and reject the notion that platforms have anything to 'give back' to the community, as their main objective is to commodify relationships. The third proposition argues in favor of reframing the 'immunity problem' by incentivizing the letting go of the self as distinctive and unique in favor of a focus on the collective and better relationships, forgetting about the difference between 'self' and 'foreign'. This also means, however, to subject platforms to stricter regulation.

Chapter five dives in an exploration of the future of user experience for the somnambulists, attempting to counteract the trend of an economy that thrives on 'experience'. In it, there is an invitation to focus more on technologies that enable their collective and auto-affective experience, allowing users to rediscover human perception. Ultimately, there is a need for human minds to grasp the concept of cognition in nonhuman technological contexts.

As mentioned before, the reading is dense and rich in content and meaning, and with a lightly embedded dystopian note to it. However, the book is pleasurable to read because it

constantly anticipates what topics will cover in current chapter and the following. *A Sleep-walker's Guide to Social Media* is an essential text not only for those who focus on media studies, but also for those who are interested in sociology, STS studies, and anthropology, disciplines that study similar issues concerning the internet, users, and human behavior in social settings.

In sum, the book invites the reader to explore the concept of affect and to welcome a new syntax involving a decentered user experience by platform design, reassuring the reader that 'disconnection' from the online world is not the answer to the issues presented throughout the text. One of the best features of this book is that its themes are deeply intertwined within the digital culture and practices occurring in our everyday lives, confirming the concerns of the author in certain areas and practices online.

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