

These transcriptions may contain errors, especially in spelling of names. These are unfortunate, and we regret that we do not have the resources to fix these errors. Still we believe these transcripts will be valuable to many users.

Conversation at Brookings

Zeynep Tufekci, Lee Rainie, and Ben Shneiderman

>> Kim Wu [phonetic] has written about, you know, the history of democratizing technologies is, eventually, somebody figures out how to throw the master switch and put it back in the hands of the [inaudible]. And, is that going to happen?

>> Well, okay, so the -- two slides down there, I have this taming the [inaudible]. I had a slide there that said [inaudible]. And my -- I don't even think -- I also read -- it's not just Kim Wu. Debora Spar had wrote this great, great book-- I really recommend it -- called "Ruling the Waves," that looks at previous sort of technological frontiers, where you have the pirates, and then the businesses, and then governments, and things kind of go back. Now, this has happened with radio. You've seen this happen with telegraph. You've seen this with navigation of -- sort of the sea faring. In fact, the word "pirate" comes from that for a reason. You know, the pirate party [inaudible]. So, yes, so the history would suggest that the -- that this will be ruled back. In fact, printing press, right -- it wounded but did not kill the Catholic church, which kind of came back with adaptations. There's no question -- authoritarian regions, democracies, corporations, everybody's adapting to this. So, it's not like they're all sitting on their hands waiting to be eaten alive by the next group of actors. All of that makes the argument that it will go back. On the other hand, this time, the difference I see, and every time somebody makes a prediction, they say, this why it's going to be different from all of history, and then they turn out to be wrong. But I think the difference here is that we had about a 15-year run of these technologies. So, if they had, like, stuffed this back in the box in 2003 or so, I think that would have been a lot more feasible. Now, we have, you know, a couple billion people in these technologies, use a certain kind of connectivity. So, that makes it hard for it to go -- you know, because radio, when it was ruled back, was pushed back, it was just tens of thousands people, maximum, right? It wasn't the same. So, that makes it hard. The second thing is, unlike the previous waves, we have big, large corporations with money who now have an interest in keeping things more or less this way. So, like, Googles of the world -- you saw in [inaudible], there was this very interesting alliance between people who are not necessarily fond of big, large corporations and a couple of big, large corporations, because there was this joining. So, that makes me think this is not going to be as easy, but if -- we're seeing so much effort. If there's a government left sleeping about the power of these technologies, [phonetic] woke them up. And I hear -- I fear this, what I call the unholy alliance, the conservatives who want to get rid of porn or something on the Internet, which is very commonly, you know, said in the Middle East. That's why they want to censor. And intellectual property industries and governments like China that want political censorship, they're all kind of coming together around these common interests, which is a pretty formidable unholy alliance, so to speak. So, anyway.

>> I'm glad you picked up on this, because this is my major issue. And during our talks this week, and there was one phrase that, I believe it was Ryan Butler [phonetic] who put on the screen, which was "avoid ahistoricity." And by that, he meant that, actually there are all these new technologies that come and go, but there are basic social-psychological principles, human relationship principles, that endure. And so, he would say that, well, yes, there are these new technologies, but the forces in play are what you need -- the larger forces are what you need to see. So, the early use in the Iranian elections, now two years, 2-1/2 years ago, celebrated again that this couldn't have happened without social media. But then, the Iranian government has caught on, and I don't know, if there were an election now in Iran, if the use of social media

could be as effective, because the government has taken very strong control over what might happen, and it is not going to let the same thing happen.

>> Well, okay, so there will be an election -- I think it's June -- in Iran. And what they have done is that, this is, you know, why -- exactly why we need to, like, look at political systems not as the Internet and everything else there, but kind of not be digital [inaudible] and look at it combined. One way to do this for them is, they can't really crack down completely on social media, because so many people know how to circumvent. In fact, I was just -- whenever the Middle Eastern censor because of pornography, they're just training a whole generation how to circumvent, because that's what happens [chuckling]. What they have done instead is, they don't -- they're not letting any reformists run. So their election [chuckling] -- they're not letting any reformist candidates run, right? So, this just shows you why the sort of political questions and Internet questions are in step right. So, let's look at Turkey, where -- my home country -- where there are some issues with Internet freedom, but not that big. But we have, you know, lots of journalists in jail. So, that kind of makes the question whether or not they can tweet or not not the same thing. Of course, it still makes an impact, because lots of things are being reported on social media. So, what the Iranian government has done is, because it can't really cap this -- they're running rigged elections. Now, China's more interesting. China's the case that people always point to and say, look, it can be contained. For me, China is the case that shows the power of social media, because they are spending probably -- new estimates, they are probably spending more on controlling the Internet than they are on their military. So, the fact that the Chinese Communist Party thinks it's so important that it's worth this fortune to try to control, and it still occasionally bursts through, tells me that it's a very powerful tool. So, that's...

>> [Inaudible] a new world that's going to stay new?

>> Well, I think scale matters and speed matters. And so, certain things are immutable or very hard to change in human personality and human systems. And yet, the orders of magnitude of what this brings into people's lives just feels different. And so, will it happen overnight? You know, and we get asked to comment all the time about, you know, is this a Twitter election as opposed to the YouTube election of 2008 [chuckling], as opposed to the blog election of 2004? So, everybody's prying for revolution and over-predicts it massively. But it just -- it feels different, and for all of that money that China's spending, you know, the net effect of their policy is fairly benign. They're setting up speed bumps. They're not throwing the master switch. And my favorite story in the paper today, "The Washington Post" has this fabulous story of these people now who circumvent the local -- the social good organizations, because they're suspected of being too close to the state, and they're just setting up their own sub-support networks, and people are going on YouTube and asking for money for their sick kids. And they're getting contributions from people who are equally poor...

>> So, they got the printing press. What do you do? You print the Bible. And then you print the Bible, but it doesn't look like the illuminated manuscript, so they spent, like, months eliminating, page by page -- they didn't get the point, you see? They wanted to have the printing -- it was only until you got to the paperbacks and things like that, you start seeing the power of the printing press, how it's different. And I think a lot of our discussions are kind of like that. We're discussing, can we save scribes, and can we find ways for them to illuminate manuscripts, or something like that, rather than talk about some more native forms of these technologies? And I think it's kind of starting more and more to be in those native forms. It's not going to change human nature, but it's going to have big impacts once it becomes that, kind of, diffused.

>> Well, we won't resolve, but you're raising the issue about how those who believe that vaccinations were causing losses and creationists and other, you know, unscientific theories are equally empowered to spread, and maybe even given a powerful tool that he didn't have access to, so we still go back to the power over truth in...

>> Yes.

>> [Laughs] Okay.

>> But, you know, I'm not convinced that there's any more -- there's any greater ignorance than there ever was. It's just now more evident [laughter]. You know, there's more evidence...

>> Okay, I'm going to disagree a little bit. And you know why I want to disagree, partly, is I think what happens is, and the vaccination example is a great one -- it's also breaking down pillars of ignorance, right? You might have been the only person that had this view that vaccination was harmful, but now you find them on Facebook, you can find each other. So, the public's fear is being sort of -- it used to be, there were the gatekeepers. And they kept certain things out. And a lot of what they kept out, I might of objected to personally, but they also would have kept out the anti-vaccination crap. And now, because these people can find each other, it does strengthen those communities. And one way I like to describe this is, the public sphere has been dominated by a certain set of gatekeepers, thoroughly grounded in a particular literate culture in a particular view of rationality, society, what's acceptable, legitimate discourse, and something like that. And you see it weakening. And the results aren't always things that, you know, I like. But some of it are things I like. And I think this kind of -- sort of weaken our gatekeepers. And, you know, non-literate cultures, non-rationalistic cultures, all of those have sort of taken space in the public sphere. It's one of the biggest challenges that this thing has thrown up for me.

>> Totally agree.

>> Questions outside? Yes, David [assumed spelling], and then here, yeah.

>> David: Well, so I think -- I think part of this, you know, kind of this is in the domain of this thing of, do you think information is a fact, or is information a process, something that we work through? And if you think of, in essence, public discourse, and the way in which we engage in discussion with each other as the process of generating our understanding, then of course it's a process. And of course, we have to go through this all again. So, we're going to have the new media alchemists, right? And maybe there'll be a new media, you know, enlightenment, right? And it's like -- so, I think, in some cases, sort of what history is showing is actually, we are a people that's actually about a process. We're not just about establishing the fact, and then there's no more discourse about it ever again, right? So I think there's something going on here, and I don't think people have really been talking about that that much.

>> So, other questions? Let's take a round of questions, and see if there -- and then we'll give you guys a chance to answer and move on. Yeah?

>> So my question is, I just heard -- you were talking about needing to understand this whole echo chamber effect. And then I heard about how pluralistic ignorance can be overcome, and that that causes people who have these minority beliefs to strengthen their beliefs more strongly. And there seems to be some connection between those two concepts, the need and the findings. I'd be interested to hear you talk about that.

>> And Seth [assumed spelling], I saw a hand there?

>> Seth: Yeah, I hope this isn't too grim, but [inaudible]. If I look back on the development of democracy [inaudible], the pessimistic view is, we settle on a certain amount of representation and tolerance and speed, because we got tired of fighting with each other. The Scots got tired of fighting with the Brits. The

French got tired of fighting with the Germans. They all got tired of fighting with each other, and eventually we decided, it was just too much. It was easier to just listen to the other guy or have another beer or something. It's a very pessimistic view of a social process, but look at the slow development of democracy and tolerance in our discourse. The question that jumps to my mind is, does technology really speed that up? And maybe it does. I don't know. Or, is that something about society as a cultural [inaudible].

>> [Inaudible] answer, and then we'll...

>> Well, I mean, this is such a big question. One thing -- first, I want to step -- I want to step back and say one thing is that these technologies rarely do one thing. So, they rarely do one thing, so they can definitely do multiple things, which ties to his example, which is that it strengthens a certain kind of, what we call homophily, which is, you find like-minded people, and you strengthen. But on the other hand, it also exposes people to diverse views in all sorts of different ways. It might not be the same people. Although, I think, like the turn to social networking, by connecting us person-to-person rather than affinity, I think has led to more diversity. Because I used to find people who were interested in things I'm interested in, whereas my Facebook friends now, like there's people from my family or my high school that now is the people-to-people, and then there's a lot of diversity there, because affinity is overlapped better than people. But -- so all that said, to go back to your question, what happens when you encounter this diversity, and do you end up thinking, oh, they're just like us. Or, do you end up thinking, we can organize and kill them better? And I -- just to be -- and let me plug an upcoming book. My colleague at the Center for Civic Media at MIT, Ethan Zuckerman, has just sort of finished with his book on this very topic, that it's supposed to go into print sometime this year -- exactly this question. And I'm just reading through the early draft. It's just an amazing book. And it turns out, and I know I'm making, sort of, some of the data I've seen from reading this book, is that, in a lot -- some cases, it leads to exactly what you say. And I've seen this kind of examples on -- I wrote about it on my blog, and it's the Iranians -- [inaudible] Iranians, the Israeli-Iranian sort of Facebook outreach. [Inaudible] small, but still probably a lot more contact between Israelis and Iranians than before. So, you see all sorts of things like this, where people meet people, and it's like, okay, you're people, too, and let's go have a beer kind of thing. But there's also evidence from, like, ethnic neighborhoods and things like that, where the encounter actually makes people close up more. They -- you know, after the encounter, they become even more closed, because there's something that is -- they're scared. You see this in various communities. Sometimes it's a big debate in Europe to how to handle this. So, I think the correct way to look at this, and by correct, I mean sort of the productive way to look at this is, how do we structure these encounter spaces so they lead more of the one rather than the other? I mean, obviously, we know from history that they can lead to both. And I think this brings a great question for the computer scientists and designers among us to talk with other people and say, so, how do you create a space in which you can make people from different groups interact with each other in a way that's humanizing and, you know, let's-have-a-beer version of that rather than, you believe that? That means you must -- I must never talk to you again. So I think it's an open question, partly because it depends on how that space is structured, and I don't think there's been enough thought about it. And I'm hoping my friend Ethan's book will be a contribution, because this is exactly what he's thinking through.

>> Lee [assumed spelling], last word?

>> Lee: Well, there -- I won't improve on that by any means. And so, I'll suggest two other dissertations that are [chuckling] embedded in this space. The first is the filter bubble idea, which is totally un-empiricized for the moment. Eli Pariser wrote a wonderful book, provocative thesis, that the way that Google organizes information, and the way all behavioral advertising is now organized, the way that Facebook renders up your friendship networks, it selects some people, deselects other people, or pushes people up and down your social chain, depending on who it understands you are. And, in many cases, that might be political understanding, but no matter what it does, there's a way now that certain information gets into our point

of -- our line of vision, and others might not. And that wouldn't be good for the world -- the have-a-beer world that we're hoping for. But it's...

>> Or tea. Whatever.

>> Lee: Or tea. So, there's that to study, and it's probably happening. It's not necessarily odious at this point, or having an odious effect, but it's there to study. The other thing is related to serendipitous encounters with information. You know, there's pretty good nice literature in the -- in journalism studies about one of the great functions that great journalism enterprises created for the culture is telling people stuff that they should know about or want to know about, but they didn't even know before they encountered it in new spaces. It makes for better societies. I think there's no question about that. What we don't know yet is what I think is happening, and is probably provable, that we're now having more of those, thanks to our networks. We've got bigger networks now, they're segmenting in interesting ways. Just even in the -- in the sort of friend-to-friend domain, there's just more possibility of stuff getting into our line of vision that we hadn't had any idea about before, and more of that probably does help. I mean, there's just a lot of literature now that the more diverse your network is, the healthier you are, the richer you are, the better jobs you get, and the better communities you live in. And so, if we can show that that's really happening, and sort of tie it to behaviors, there might be a Nobel Prize in that, too.

>> [Chuckles] Okay, we'll end it right there...