

Tero Karppi's *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*

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Tero Karppi. *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

As one of the 2.45 billion^[1] users of Facebook, the thought of disconnecting from the platform feels drastic, isolating, and alienating. Even after data breaches, the Cambridge Analytic scandal,^[2] and a multitude of egregious decision-making from Facebook executives, for me, disconnection is not an option. These feelings may be similar to what any avid FB-user might feel when debating disconnecting from the platform. Not having a Facebook account, not engaging in “liking,” posting status updates, or sharing content, means missing out – on newsfeed posts, event invitations, the thoughts and musings of acquaintances and co-workers, direct messages from friends (or long lost family members!), and advertisements, news stories, and games.

Disconnect explores Facebook's ‘affective bonds’ that treat disconnection as an existential threat. Karppi questions how much control over our digital lives we really have, and finds that it may not be as much as we would like. This is illustrated by Facebook's algorithms that leave us powerless in determining the information we see or do not see – decided instead by concealed codes, AI, and software that are becoming so “smart,” some even have the ability to predict our behavior, taking pre-determinism to a new level – controlled by digital forces we cannot physically see, but that exist in the hidden infrastructure of Facebook's platform. Furthermore, the Cambridge Analytic scandal, which Karppi is unable to really explore as the full story broke three days after *Disconnect* went into production, proved that our Facebook data is not safe, but instead mined for both political and monetary gain. Karppi traces the affective connections among engagement and participation – perhaps Facebook's most important facets of connection, as they drive marketing (read: revenue) – and the binaries of disconnection: deactivating, logging out, and (virtually) dying. Each chapter – which reads as though it could stand alone – delves into a different aspect of the affective nature of Facebook, with chapters two and three, “Engage” and “Participate,” focusing on the affective appeal of sharing and curating content across our social networks. Engagement and participation are crucial to Facebook's future success, as Karppi explains: “affect generates participation, and participation generates affective encounters” (2018, 55). With user engagement driving participation, it is no surprise why Facebook tracks exactly *how much* we engage and participate – which explains the rationale behind the “year in review” reports that tell us how many likes we received and gave, how many friends we made – the platform has strategically built in ways to further drive and encourage active engagement to increase revenue through the form of data. Take for instance the “reaction buttons” that appear in conjunction with the notorious thumbs-up or “like” button; we are no longer reduced to only one emotion, that of liking, but instead can now express love, laughter, anger, surprise, and sadness. These reactions not only allow users to engage more effectively, but also allow Facebook to gather data in a new, strategic way: tracking not only what we like, but what makes us angry, sad, and entertained.

As Karppi describes, Facebook's motivation for connection, participation, and engagement stems from its capitalist business model. Karppi draws on Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and José van Dijck, among others, to trace the power, control, and our 'culture of connectivity' that Facebook leverages – turning our social media networks and our digital activities into massive profits. Perhaps as disturbing, Facebook also uses the platform to conduct its own experimental research, without the consent or knowledge of users. For example, "in 2014, a group of Facebook-affiliated researchers published a highly controversial study titled, 'Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks.'" With 689,003 Facebook users as their subjects, researchers "reduced either negatively or positively loaded content from their News Feeds," and found that emotional contagion occurred – without users ever having knowledge of the study or their participation (2018, 114). Facebook's model has, rather deliberately, reduced users to profit margins and lab rats – a means to an end, to borrow from Kant. This "networked capitalism," as Karppi calls it, reveals the intentionality surrounding Facebook's design (2018, 124).

While Castells describes the Internet as a "lifeline of the interconnected global economy," Karppi situates Facebook as a wolf in sheep's clothing, masquerading as a buoy but, in reality, acting as the current taking us under – to use Castell's imagery (2018, 124). *Disconnect* illustrates the strategies Facebook employs to discourage disconnection – not just physical obstacles, like requiring users to contact Facebook directly to delete your account, but specifically the affective bonds that function to keep users engaged and participating, with the thought of disconnecting no where in mind. Because disconnection, as Karppi demonstrates, is the existential threat to Facebook, it can only be conquered by framing disconnection as an existential threat to the user, as well, which is perhaps best achieved through what we now call FOMO – fear of missing out. To borrow Castell's phrasing, imagine Facebook as a "lifeline" to connection, our disconnection ensures losing that lifeline, and surely missing out – on posts, discussions, life updates from loved ones, event invitations, viral memes, and more. To discourage disconnection, Facebook feeds off of our fear of not being included, or missing out.

Karppi's *Disconnect*, while persuasively describing the strategic functions of Facebook and its effects on our affect, falls short of examining the dangers that arise as a result of Facebook's infrastructure and design. For example, our lack of control over algorithms that are specifically designed to cater to our previous activity further reinforces confirmation bias, likely without us even being aware. Confirmation bias, our tendency to filter information that conforms to our pre-existing beliefs, is perpetuated and exacerbated across mediated channels like Facebook, which are controlled by codes that are designed to do exactly that: feed us more information like the previous. We, as the users, are no longer in control of deciding which information we encounter, as it is now pre-determined for us by these hidden circuits that exist across the web. This is especially dangerous because confirmation bias blocks logical thought when it does not align with our own convictions, which becomes problematic as we discover and encounter (new) information that does *not* conform with our beliefs. In a world where the phrase "alternative facts" has become synonymous with information with which one does not agree, exploring the affective components of confirmation bias may prove crucial for understanding the persistence of disinformation. Second, Facebook is a known disseminator of disinformation, yet a discussion on "fake news" does not make it past an acknowledgement that it exists. The spread of disinformation across social media platforms, namely Facebook, is increasingly dangerous, as exemplified by authoritarian governments running disinformation campaigns against their own people, leading to atrocities like the genocide in Myanmar.^[3]

Karppi identifies the affective components of Facebook, bringing to light an even broader question: what are the affective components of information behavior (seeking, consumption, use) in general? Facebook's study on

emotional contagion proves a link between the information we encounter on a daily basis and our own emotions, but what implications does this have on mediated communication more generally? While Karppi illustrates the affective bonds that connect us *to and across* Facebook, *Disconnect* elicits a number of new questions for affective research across social media platforms and mediated communication more generally, especially as we move closer to a post-truth world in which facts no longer carry the same weight (or can suddenly become “alternative”), and instead, feelings, emotion, and affect reign supreme. Has the digital age, or the information age, exacerbated this problem? Further research on the “affective bonds” of information consumption may shed light on this massive shift from reason to emotion.

Notes

1. J. Clement, “Number of monthly active Facebook user worldwide as of 4th quarter 2019,” *Statistica*, Jan. 30, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>
 2. See *The Great Hack*, directed by Karim Amer & Jehane Noujaim (2019), Netflix.
 3. Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
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