

Move Slower and Protect People: Toward Social Media Inquiry and Activism in Social Studies

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Facebook Chairman and CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies at a House Financial Services Committee hearing in Washington, D.C., October 23, 2019.

In the United States, people have long had a tendency to see the immediate, personal benefits of new technologies as contributing to human progress well before understanding their long-term social consequences.¹ Facebook offers an instructive (and destructive) example.² Even though Facebook's early motto was "move fast and break things," the public generally ignored what now appears to be a warning. One way the company moved *fast* to expand its user base was by partnering with mobile providers in developing countries to offer limited Internet access called "Free Basics." Facebook argued that this service could offer progress by bringing more people online, which would "help improve their lives."³ However, researchers from these developing countries concluded that the service actually offered something more akin to digital colonialism whereby the company collected personal user data, violated net neutrality (by providing access only to sites that benefited the company), turned users into consumers of mostly Western corporate content, and failed to address people's linguistic needs.⁴

Facebook also *broke* many things along the way. Facebook sold advertisements to Russians seeking to widen social divisions and undermine U.S. democracy during the 2016 election; allowed landlords and homesellers to violate the Fair Housing Act and enact digital redlining by targeting and excluding people by race, disability, or religion; and was blamed by the United Nations for doing too little to prevent Myanmar military members from using the social network to promote the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims.⁵ While Facebook's market share and profits grew substantially, the company failed to build infrastructural safeguards or accept the ethical responsibilities of a company whose algorithms and platform determine which types of messages spread around the world.

While more powerful, reckless, and deceptive than most tech companies,⁶ Facebook is emblematic of a common pattern whereby "big tech" (referring here for instance to Google, Amazon, and the Gig economy) introduces disruptive technologies, the social harms of these technologies become evident over time, and only then do public and legislative debates ensue. Many of these issues have historical antecedents. Chemical companies dumped hazardous waste into waterways and cars failed to add seatbelts until activists pushed for

change. New technologies often require updated laws, regulations, and norms. I highlight Facebook (which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp) because of its outsized influence on democracy worldwide. However, other social media platforms face similar social problems (e.g., Twitter) and may be of more interest to youth (e.g., Snapchat and TikTok). In this paper, I argue that social studies educators should inquire into technological conundrums that are of concern to both students and society, and that we should work together to take action for a more just and democratic social media ecosystem.⁷

Social Media Inquiry and Activism

Since the publication of the *C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards* there has been a move toward conducting inquiries bounded by compelling questions that confront questions of importance to students and society.⁸ As I follow current events related to social media I often compose compelling and supporting questions as the basis for Inquiry Design Model (IDM) units, and for research projects, or as bell ringers to start classes (see Table 1). For example, my colleague Marie Heath and I created an IDM with the compelling question, “*Has social media made it easier to effect social change?*”⁹ We tasked students with comparing primary documents from activists’ tactics in both the historical Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary Women’s March. Students concluded the IDM by using evidence to deliberate upon the compelling question and take action on social issues important to them by using on- and off-line tactics for enacting change.

Social media platforms are not neutral and their effects often harm minoritized groups disproportionately. A new facial recognition company called Clearview AI recently “invented a tool that could end your ability to walk down the street anonymously.”¹⁰ The company scraped more than three billion social media photos into a database and is currently

selling it to law enforcement. While Clearview AI seemingly threatens the privacy of all people, facial recognition technology has often delivered false matches for people of color. As Ruha Benjamin pointed out, technologies can “reproduce existing inequities that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of the previous era.”¹¹ Teachers should therefore also design critical inquiries whereby students litigate compelling questions “that explicitly critique systems of oppression and power.”¹² To critically inquire into the case of Clearview AI, educators might ask, *Who is responsible if technologies are racist?*

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While people of all ages use social media, young people are heavy users of platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram.¹³ Youth use social media to forge their personal and civic identities on platforms where they may find communities of affirmation and even address injustices.¹⁴ However, young people are also used by platforms designed to distract them (with excessive notifications, Snapstreaks, and infinite scroll), extract their personal data, and nudge them toward outrageous content. Many of us are in less control of our social media behaviors than we would like to believe. While most state standards, curriculum guides, and resources will not address these emerging issues directly, youth need opportunities to interrogate social media. In the section below, and the accompanying tables, I offer examples of possible inquiries related to digital identity, privacy, and democracy.

Digital Identity

While educators often want students to put away their distracting smartphones at school, I have found it educational to ask students to think deeply about their smartphones, their social media, and their emerging identities. Social media can be intertwined with sociality in ways that adults often do not recognize or understand,¹⁵ but educators can help students learn and reflect on critical issues such as their racial identities.

On one hand, white youth can often be oblivious to race and view their frame of reference as normal. This can be because they were taught to ignore race instead of recognize how racism functions in society and benefits them.¹⁶ By examining their online networks, danah boyd pushed privileged teens to examine why their online networks reproduced racial divisions in their schools, which they had denied existed.¹⁷ On the other hand, when white youth engage around race it can be with racists. Many white nationalists have been radicalized on YouTube, a site that directs people toward extremist content.¹⁸

Social studies educators could examine design decisions by asking students, *should your emojis match your skin tone?* This question can afford opportunities to reflect on racial identities, allow students to address their racial understandings and misunderstandings, and investigate the design shortcomings of skin tone options.¹⁹ Such prompts could encourage students to confront discriminatory design and potentially move toward anti-racist identities.

Similarly, students may also explore beautification filters and changing images of beauty over time and across place and people. I have also encouraged students to investigate how social media influence their lives by keeping diaries of their use and technofasting from social media for an extended period of time.²⁰ These personal investigations can be deepened by exploring how the spread of books, radio, and the television changed news, politics, and people in the past.

Table 1. *Social Media Compelling and Supporting Questions Related to Digital Identity*

Compelling Questions	Supporting Questions
Should your emojis match your skin tone? ²¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you choose your skin tone emojis? • Why are some users more likely than others to try to match their skin tone? • What are the shortcomings of skin tone emoji options?
Do beautification filters distort beauty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do social media filters work? • Who are filters made for? • What are the benefits and harms of filters?
How does social media shape us?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has social media changed in society? • What could replace social media? • How does social media shape your life?

Digital Privacy

In recent years, Google, Facebook, and a host of “smart” devices have profited from tracking, extracting, and selling users’ personal data. Most notably, Facebook allowed Cambridge Analytica to harvest users’ data without consent and then use that data to microtarget voters during the 2016 election.²² However, young people tend to generally trust these companies and accept such data collection as a trade-off for using the platforms.²³ Educators might present students with compelling examples of digital privacy violations for them to see the topic as controversial. Students might learn about how Facebook posted purchases from other websites directly to users’ newsfeeds or how it has destroyed market competition by imitating competitors’ features or buying them out. They might learn more about how YouTube knowingly collected the data of children under the age of 13 on channels aimed at kids in violation of the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act.²⁴

Students tend to be concerned about two areas related to digital privacy. First, young people are concerned with privacy from parents or guardians, who can closely track their online activities.²⁵ Second, youth find the collection of their geolocation data, especially when shown it on a map, as “creepy.”²⁶ In recent years, police forces have increased the number of reverse location search warrants that they use to

obtain geolocation data from Google in areas where crimes were committed, and this data includes information on anyone near a crime scene, including innocent people with no connection to the alleged crime that was committed.²⁷ Social studies educators might draw on students’ concerns about geolocation data and parental surveillance as entry points to address digital privacy issues. Educators could examine whether law enforcement requests for data violate the Fourth Amendment guarantee against unreasonable searches and seizures or whether Facebook should continue expanding globally without guaranteeing safety and privacy to users first. Finally, students might investigate whether an array of laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union, the California Consumer Privacy Act, and Argentina’s

Right to be Forgotten law provide appropriate levels of digital privacy.

Digital Democracy

Social media has impacted democracy in profound ways. On one hand, platforms have allowed activists to raise the profile of their issues, shift narratives, and instigate change. While the role of social media may have been more of a mixed bag than believed initially, Arab Spring activists and citizen-journalists did use these platforms toward democratic ends. Activists employed hashtags from #BlackLivesMatter to #MeToo to #GirlsLikeUs to confront injustices and seek change. On the other hand, Twitter moments and Facebook algorithms have somewhat replaced journalists in deciding what is newsworthy. Social media offers a public square that is splintered by personalized news and preference and filter bubbles. Moreover, social media has shifted our very meanings of terms like *news*, *information*, and *participation* in ways that may be less compatible with democracy.

Authoritarian regimes employ their considerable resources and technical expertise to exploit Facebook to organize countermovements, frame public debates, allow online venting (which can provide citizens a false sense of freedom) instead of political protests, and surveil and harass opposition activists and journalists.²⁸ Vladimir Putin, for example, uses these methods to consolidate his

Table 2. *Social Media Compelling and Supporting Questions Related to Digital Privacy*

Compelling Questions	Supporting Questions
Is social media invading our privacy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data do users provide to social media companies? • What data do social media companies extract from users’ data? • What do social media companies do with users’ data?
Do police have the right to know where we are?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What geolocation data do law enforcement request? • How does the 4th Amendment apply to online data? • Which communities are most impacted by the sharing of geolocation data?
Did Facebook expand too fast?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do different countries use Facebook differently? • Why does Facebook give away Free Basics? • What are the costs of Free Basics?

Table 3. *Social Media Compelling and Supporting Questions Related to Digital Democracy*

Compelling Questions	Supporting Questions
Should speech be protected on social media?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the U.S. Constitution protect speech on social media? • How do platforms regulate hate speech? • Should political figures' posts be subject to the same rules as everyone else? • Is amplification of posts a free speech issue?
Who is responsible for online speech?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is section 230 of the Communications Decency Act? • What are arguments for rewriting section 230? • What are arguments against rewriting section 230?
Does social media need a Fairness Doctrine?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the Fairness Doctrine? • What were the benefits of the Fairness Doctrine? • What were the shortcomings of the Fairness Doctrine?
Can we stop online misinformation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why does misinformation spread online? • How does online misinformation hurt us? • How can we address online misinformation?
What is justice for #BlackFeminists? ²⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do #BlackFeminists use hashtags for activism? • What issues do #BlackFeminists take up? • How has hashtag activism influenced public dialogues?
Should we break up big tech?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a monopoly? • Were Gilded Age businessmen robber barons or captains of industry? • How are big tech CEOs similar and different from Gilded Age businessmen? • What might be the effects of breaking up big tech?

power domestically, but also to influence foreign affairs and elections. Workers at Russia's Internet Research Agency have interfered in the U.S. political dialogues online since 2014 by exploiting the weaknesses of social media.³⁰ Russians created fake U.S. personas (e.g., false flags) to run Facebook groups like Blacktivist (i.e., Black identity) and Heart of Texas (i.e., Texas identity) that sought to increase in/out group identities to create polarization or achieve political aims (e.g., suppressing the Black vote, encouraging Texas secession). They also created memes, gamed algorithms to encourage outrage clicks, and employed troll armies to disrupt online dialogues. In one case, Russians were even able to use their Facebook groups—Heart of Texas and United Muslims of America—to successfully organize competing rallies where protesters showed up in the streets of Houston to confront one another. The Soviet Union may have lost the Cold War, but Russia and other authoritarian regimes are turning the tide in the Information War.

Even more troubling, verified users, media members, and hyper-partisan

groups in the U.S. are increasingly pushing disinformation and conspiracy theories grounded in suspicion and anger towards other political groups. Recent examples include claims of a #RiggedElection after the 2020 Iowa Caucus when results were delayed. When the internet is "designed for sensationalism and virality," outrageous claims thrive.

Under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, passed in 1996, Internet companies were allowed to grow without being liable for what is posted on their sites. In recent years, more people have started to question whether this law should be amended to shift more responsibility to big social media companies both for what people post on their sites and for the posts that the algorithms of the big social media companies amplify. Another suggestion has been that social media companies should encourage public deliberation and discourage political polarization by establishing practices similar to those required by the Fairness Doctrine, enforced by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission between 1949 and 1987, under which television

and radio broadcasting outlets had to provide airtime to address important social issues and include contrasting views.

As a result of deepfakes (manipulated videos), false flags (accounts that pretend to represent some group), and fake news (misinformation), citizens can grow cynical of what information they can trust to make decisions on public issues such as the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. While authoritarians, extremists, and opportunists game the vulnerabilities of the constantly shifting platforms, Mark Zuckerberg and other tech CEOs regularly make promises and efforts to address these problems without acknowledging that their business models are the problem.³¹ Most social media platforms are designed to encourage "engagement and enrage-ment," not thoughtful dialogue. When a Facebook "friend" posts "fake news" that the Pope endorsed Donald Trump, the story will capture the attention of those whose biases it confirms and also those who challenge the post in the comments. Algorithms will ultimately push out the misinformation far further than the fact-checking article that later

debunks it. Facebook and other social media companies have few incentives to prioritize democracy.

Activism

Social media inquiry must turn to informed activism for democracy and justice if we are to address the problems social media has amplified. Students may change platform preferences, privacy settings, or posting habits. They may address policies for social media sharing (e.g., students' pictures) in their own classrooms or schools. Or, they may engage in participatory politics to pressure companies or lawmakers to effect more widespread changes such as:

- Create departments that assess the ethics of technologies
- Pass more stringent privacy laws
- Amend section 230 of the Communications Decency Act to hold large companies more responsible for what is posted on their platforms
- Pressure Facebook to offer equal time to political candidates in the feeds of all users, akin to the old Fairness Doctrine
- Students should critically consider how social media policies exacerbate structural social inequalities and damage our democracy.

Conclusion

Citizens should not have to sign off their rights, voice, and future when they log into social media platforms. Other dominant media forms have long been pressured and regulated for the common good. If social media environments are contaminated, we will not survive by identifying the toxins; we also need environmental remediation, regulation, and retribution. The devices, apps, and websites that are so intertwined in many students' lives offer opportunities for social studies inquiry and activism that are important to them and our democracy. If the motto at Facebook was to

move fast and break things then maybe citizens must, as Ruha Benjamin suggested, implore technologists to “move slower and protect people.”³²

Notes

1. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage, 1992).
2. Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Roger McNamee, *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).
3. Kofi Yeboah et al., “Free Basics in Real Life: Six Case Studies on Facebook’s Internet ‘On Ramp’ Initiative from Africa, Asia and Latin America,” (2017). Retrieved from https://advox.globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/FreeBasicsinRealLife_FINALJuly27.pdf
4. See Olivia Solon, “It’s Digital Colonialism: How Facebook’s Free Internet Service Has Failed Its Users,” *The Guardian* (July 27, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/27/facebook-free-basics-developing-markets>
5. Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*; McNamee, *Zucked*.
6. Zeynep Tufekci, “Why Zuckerberg’s 14-Year Apology Tour Hasn’t Fixed Facebook,” *Wired* (April 6th, 2018), www.wired.com/story/why-zuckerberg-15-year-apology-tour-hasnt-fixed-face-book/
7. For more on confronting technoethical conundrums in teacher education see: Daniel G. Krutka, Marie Heath, and Bret Staudt Willet, “Foregrounding Technoethics: Toward Critical Perspectives in Technology and Teacher Education,” *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education* 27, no. 4 (2019): 555–574.
8. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3; C3 Teachers, “The Inquiry Design Model,” www.c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model/.
9. Daniel G. Krutka and Marie K. Heath, “Has Social Media Made it Easier to Effect Social Change?: Inquiring into Tactics for Change through Primary Sources,” *Social Education* 83, no. 5 (October 2019): 269–274.
10. Kashmir Hill, “The Secretive Company That Might End Privacy as We Know It,” *New York Times* (February 10, 2020), www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/technology/clearview-privacy-facial-recognition.html
11. Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, Mass.: Polity Press, 2019): 5–6.
12. Ryan M Crowley and LaGarrett J. King, “Making Inquiry Critical: Examining Power and Inequity in the Classroom,” *Social Education* 82, no. 1 (January–February 2018): 16.
13. Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2018,” *Pew Research Center* 1 (2018): 1–4.
14. Benjamin Gleason, “Adolescents Becoming Feminist on Twitter: New Literacies, Practices, Commitments, and Identity Work,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 62, no. 3 (2018): 281–289.

15. danah boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014).
16. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard For White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2018).
17. boyd, *It’s Complicated*.
18. Zeynep Tufekci, “YouTube, the Great Radicalizer,” *New York Times* (March 10, 2018), www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.
19. This article links to numerous resources, including the episode addressing the question, “How Do You Choose Which Emoji Skin Tone to Use?” from the podcast, “Why’d You Push that Button?” See Ashley Carman, “The Five Emoji Skin Tone Options Don’t Accommodate a Diverse World,” *The Verge* (December 12, 2018), www.theverge.com/2018/12/12/18123833/podcast-emoji-skin-tone-use-options-unicode-choices.
20. Nicole Damico and Daniel G. Krutka, “Social Media Diaries and Fast: Educating for Digital Mindfulness with Pre-service Teachers,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 73 (2018): 109–119.
21. The podcast described in note 19 is a good resource for discussing this question.
22. Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*; McNamee, *Zucked*.
23. Margaret S. Crocco, Avner Segall, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, Alexandra Stamm, and Rebecca Jacobsen, “It’s Not Like They’re Selling Your Data to Dangerous People’: Internet Privacy, Teens, and (Non-) Controversial Public Issues,” *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 44, no. 1 (2020): 21–33.
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27. See Aaron Mak, “Close Enough,” *Slate* (February 9, 2019), <https://slate.com/technology/2019/02/reverse-location-search-warrants-google-police.html>.
28. Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017).
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31. Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*; McNamee, *Zucked*.
32. Benjamin, *Race After Technology*.

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