Interview – David J. Gunkel
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1. In one of your texts, you proposed a redeployment of social contract theory in light of Facebook. How did you arrive at this idea and what conclusion can be drawn from it?

You are, I believe, referring to a text called "Social Contract 2.0." This essay, as you accurately describe, applies social contract theory to social media in general and Facebook in particular. The text itself has an interesting history. I originally wrote it at the invitation of Dr. Can Bilgili of the Istanbul Commerce University. It was initially developed in Krakow, Poland during the fall semester (in the northern hemisphere) of 2011, published in Turkish translation in 2012, and then delivered at the second National Meeting of the Network of Research Groups in Communication (Encontro Nacional da Rede de Grupos de Pesquisa em Comunicação) at Natal, Brazil in November of 2013. But you asked how I came to this idea and what conclusions can be drawn from it.

The idea originally came to me while working with my students. In the process of talking about issues regarding privacy and control over one's personal data, my students and I began looking at the terms of service agreements for a number of online social applications—Second Life, Google+, and Facebook. In doing so, we discovered a couple of really interesting things. First, we learned that none of us ever read these documents. Although we consent to them by clicking "agree" in the box associated with the statement "I have read the terms of service and agree to it," none of us had ever bothered to read what we were agreeing to. We were, in effect, giving our consent to and approving some very problematic rules and regulations without knowing what those rules and regulations stipulated.

Second, we found that these documents did not just articulate the usual things like user responsibilities and corporate liability. Instead they sought to establish, justify, and

regulate the very terms of sociability and political organization. This is when I realized that the way to read and understand these documents needed to change. These texts were no longer legal contracts for online services, they were the founding documents of online social organization and order. And it is at this point that I realized that the best way to begin to understand these texts and the social networks they governed would be to use social contract theory.

Now what conclusions can be drawn from this? There are several. First, the Terms of a social network are, in both form and function, a "social contract." These documents, which in the case of Facebook involve and apply to almost half-a-billion users worldwide, represent a privatization of the political as individuals form social affiliations under the sovereignty not of national governments but multinational corporations. These agreements, therefore, constitute the next iteration of what political philosophers, beginning with Thomas Hobbes, have referred to as the "social contract," or what I have called, following a procedure that is common-place in the IT industry, social contract 2.0.

Second, ignorance is not bliss. Despite the fact that these documents prescribe and regulate the rights and responsibilities of users, dictating the terms and conditions of online social interaction and affiliation, many of us, even those of us who are politically active and attentive, either ignore these texts as unimportant or dismiss them as a kind of "legalese" necessary to obtain access but not very interesting in their own right or worth serious consideration. This negligence is irresponsible. And we cannot continue to operate in ignorance. Or if we do continue to operate in ignorance, we do so at our own risk.

Third, and because of this, we need to develop critical citizenship for the 21st century. Being critical of a terms of service agreement does not mean nor does it necessarily entail that one simply opt-out. It would be naïve to expect that any social organization, whether real or virtual, will be able to get everything correct from the beginning. And there may remain, as is clearly the case with Facebook's documents, one or more aspect of the contractual agreement that give users legitimate reasons to be cautious or concerned. Deciding not to participate, or opting out of the social contract, is clearly one way to avoid or even dispute such problems, but doing so not only means missing out on the opportunities afforded by these increasingly useful and popular Internet applications but, more importantly, does little or nothing to question, challenge, or improve existing policies. Instead of opting out, then, we can alternatively engage these new social systems, capitalizing on their opportunities while remaining critical of the limitations of their social contract and advocating for improvements. This is the route that I pursue and advocate, and it is what I try to teach my students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

2. Facebook has been identified by many analysts as the catalyst for social upheavals around the world. What, in fact, is the importance of this tool in the world today?

This is a really good question, especially given the events of the past several years. As you know, social media have been credited as a contributing factor to recent social activism and political transformations, like the Arab Spring, where Twitter was celebrated (mainly by international news media) for its ability to bring us news of events on the ground as they happened, or Facebook, which was reportedly used to help mobilize protesters involved in the Occupy Movement in the US and the July protests of 2013 in Brazil. And there is no doubt in my mind that these technological tools—the Internet, social media applications, and mobile devices—were useful in helping to organize and report on these important events. But I think we need to be clear as to what this means.

First, I would caution against a technological determinist reading. Although these technologies were effective for organizing recent social and political action. There is nothing about the technology that causes or would determine this particular outcome. In other words, the apparent democratizing potential of social media does not necessarily produce democracy. In fact, the "democratizing" potential of social media is a bit of an illusion. Even though Facebook was used to mobilize protests, and used quite effectively, this was mainly due to a momentary asymmetrical employment of the technology and had nothing to do with the technology itself. The important difference here is that the protesters got there first. They used the technology of Facebook and Twitter to mobilize their efforts and did so before the authorities—governments, police, security forces, etc.—realized this. But once the authorities caught on, they also utilized the same technology to get a jump on the protesters.

Second, if you look at the governing documents—the terms of service agreements—for these social networking applications, it is clear that their commitment to democratic reform is limited. We should not kid ourselves. Facebook is a multinational corporation, and they are interested not in social and political liberation but corporate earnings and the bottom line. Their documents give lip service to "transparency" and "democratic participation" but only insofar as these can be monetized and made profitable. Despite the organization's explicit commitment "to make the world more open and transparent" and its promise to users to foster and support a transparent political process, it should be remembered that Facebook is, in terms of its own governing structure, a dictatorship. It is arguably a benevolent dictatorship, where the ruling elite has, in principle at least, pledged itself to transparency, openness, and popular participation. But it is a dictatorship nevertheless. Instead of providing a truly democratic process, then, Facebook has instituted what Joseph Bonneau calls "democracy theatre." It proudly displays all the symptoms of democratic participation while maintaining strict and virtually absolute authoritarian control over all aspects of the social process.

Third, and to make matters worse, Facebook's privacy statement indicates that the organization will fully cooperate with authorities. In particular, the corporation tells users

that it may use any and all information in response to a legal request, like a search warrant or subpoena. Consequently, Facebook explicitly agrees to comply with law enforcement both in the US and elsewhere. This has at least two related consequences. On the one hand, it exposes all users to surveillance by US law enforcement, not because this policy is weak but because the standard for obtaining legal warrants and subpoenas are so low within US Federal law. On the other hand, this policy supports and has been used to justify Facebook's cooperation with other national governments. Israeli authorities, for example, recently obtained access to Facebook data which they used to compile a black-list of pro-Palestinian protesters in order to restrict access to travel. And the content and IP numbers of Kurdish activists have been blocked presumably at the request of the Turkish government. Although Facebook presents itself as "creating a world that is more open and transparent," it also works with and supports the surveillance operations and hegemony of real-world governments.

3. What does the increased use of social networks tell us about contemporary sociability? Are we communicating more often and better or are we losing the dimension of the Other, transformed into binary codes?

This is another really interesting and important question. In communication studies, at least as it has been practiced in North America, there is a tendency to privilege human face-to-face interaction as a kind of standard, default formulation of sociability. In other words, the interpersonal or intersubjective situation of spoken discourse in physical space where one individual encounters another is assumed to be the "natural" state of affairs and therefore that against which all other modes of communication, especially mediated communication, are judged and evaluated. And your question is formulated and proceeds according to this understanding. So although it is an interesting and important question, it already endorses a viewpoint and set of assumptions that I think we need to interrogate and analyze. And this is one area of research that has consumed a good amount of my time and effort. Rather than review all of this, however, let me say two things that might help explain my work in this area.

First, although face-to-face communication is considered to be a kind of natural, default condition that would proceed any and all forms of mediated interaction, it is actually an after-effect and derived product of mediated communication. In terms of communication theory, for instance, we only get face-to-face communication *after* developing the theory of mediated communication. The basic model of communication, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's mathematical model, was initially developed for telecommunications systems. It is only after this ground-breaking work with this technology that the concept of face-to-face communication is formulated as such and by way of comparison to what initially occurs by way of technical mediation. We see something similar in recording technology. The concept of "live music," which is considered by many to be the first and therefore privileged form of music, is only conceptualized *after* the invention of sound recording. In this way, then, it is actually technological reproduction that precedes the very concept of the live event. Ultimately all of this is rooted in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which

ends with what is the first recorded debated about communication technology. During Plato's time, new media were obviously not computers and the Internet but writing. And Socrates worries that the art or *techne* (the Greek root of our word *technology*) of writing, as a new technological mode of recording and communicating information, would harm the memory and face-to-face spoken discourse. To put it in the terms of your question, Socrates was concerned that the new technology might have an adverse effect on human sociability. But again what we see in this dialogue is a kind of critical inversion. As Jacques Derrida initially pointed out, the logocentric privilege (the privileging of spoken discourse in face-to-face social interaction) is already made possible and bounded by the technology of writing that seems to threaten it from the outside.

Second, and following from this, I think the crucial task is not so much to respond to this question directly but to challenge and even change the terms of the inquiry. As long as we proceed in this fashion—as long as we continue to ask whether and to what extent technology allows us to communicate more or better—we will not advance much beyond what we find in Plato's *Phaedrus*. We will, in effect, reproduce a debate that is over 2000 years old. What is needed, I believe, is another way of asking about technology and its impact on our social lives. What is needed is another set of questions that can open up new possibilities and new directions in social research. And this is precisely what I have sought to do in all my work whether the subject of the research is video games, social media, remixing and mashup, or artificial intelligence.

4. Are you optimistic about the society aspects of cyberculture?

I think I would answer this question in the affirmative but with some qualification. I am admittedly optimistic about the opportunities and challenges of online social interaction and cyberculture. But this does not mean that I simply want to celebrate it or promote it as an unquestioned and/or unqualified benefit. My position and approach is always critical. I think we need to engage these opportunities fully, but we need to do so in such a way that maintains critical distance. So I guess what I am saying is that I am neither pessimistic nor optimistic, which, as you will recognize, is one of the classic binary pairs that structures both ontological thinking and moral evaluation. Like Nietzsche, I am less concerned with figuring out what is good and what is bad in cyberculture and more interested in learning how to think outside the box—that is, *jenseits von gut und böse* or "beyond good and evil." My concern therefore is not to issue judgments about what is good and what is bad based on evaluative assumptions that remain un- or under-interrogated. Rather what I seek to do is to investigate these fundamental assumptions that already dictate for us the terms by which we organize things into good vs. bad or pessimistic vs. optimistic. My concern, then, is not to issue moral judgments about technology and social interaction but to ask about the condition for the possibility of making such judgments. This is, if you recall Kant's critical philosophy, precisely what "criticism" and "critical thinking" is all about.

5. What innovations can cyberculture contribute to the relations between citizens and governments?

Let me answer this question in two ways. First a kind of paradox. On the one hand, the Internet, social media applications, e-government solutions, and mobile devices of all shapes and sizes appear to provide us with new and unparalleled opportunities for democratic involvement and social transformation. And there is good evidence already available to support this claim. Many of the transformative social and political events of the past 5 years—the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the protests in Turkey, Brazil, and Ukraine—all point to ways in which new technology can have a remarkable effect on social structures and political organization. This is not new. In other words, it is not something limited to digital media. This is one of the important lessons of the history of technology. Modern Europe and the modern nation state as we know it, is by and large a product of print technology, which allowed for new democratic challenges to the existing powers of the Catholic Church and the established monarchies. But, and on the other hand, the same technologies have been used and will always be used by the establishment to reinforce their position and consolidate their power. This is clearly evident with both state and corporate surveillance. Although Facebook has been instrumental in helping to facilitate and organize recent social movements and protests, the organization also maintains a massive data base on all its users and will, when requested, gladly share this data with state agencies, security forces, and police.

Second, although this is interesting, it is, I believe, not necessarily the most important aspect of what you ask about. What I find important here is not the way that Facebook and other forms of online social interaction challenge or support existing state apparatus. Instead what I find interesting is the way that applications like Facebook challenge the very idea and hegemony of the nation state itself. In other words, the question, for me, is not whether Facebook can transform the relationship between citizens and governments but the way that Facebook challenges the very concepts of "citizen" and "government." What I see happening with Facebook and similar applications is the beginning of a new social experiment, what I call "social contract 2.0." My concern, therefore, is not "how is Facebook changing the terms of the political relationship between citizens and their government?" My question is more fundamental: "How are social media applications, like Facebook, transforming the very fabric of modern politics and the social order?"