

# Where Bans for Robots & Co Make Sense

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*Translation from German; Published in Aufbruch No. 257, 2022*

Advances in the fields of machine learning, big data, and artificial intelligence have greatly contributed to the profitability of social media platforms. However, this comes at a great cost to issues such as human dignity and user privacy. It is now high time to ban their use.

A world without social media such as Instagram or Facebook has become unfathomable. Behind the harmless façade of entertainment and "sharing", however, lies a machine-supported greed for profit which degrades its users into unpaid data slaves and manipulable products by mercilessly exploiting our evolutionary need for interpersonal recognition.

## **The human being becomes a product**

There is usually no fee for using social media. Most "users" do not give this much thought; the free use of the corresponding services and tools is taken for granted. Behind this, however, lie opaque business models, which treat "users" more like commodities than customers, unwittingly providing large amounts of private data which is then transformed into the actual digital product. Humans as products are then manipulated into acting as unpaid influencers, recommending products to others encouraging them to follow suit. "Users" are thereby assigned a purely quantitative value based on algorithms. These processes are associated with the most intensive invasions of privacy in human history. In addition, they demonstrate a disrespect towards human dignity as autonomous acting persons, says Dutch media scientist José van Dijck.

From an ethical perspective, the lack of remuneration for the time, work, and creativity users dedicate in these informal roles is highly problematic. The collection of data is in most cases done by an unpaid interaction between an individual and a machine. Private enterprises create a business model that is trading with the "work of selfhood", that is, self-presentation and communication with the immediate environment. For profit's sake, this selfhood is even shaped by social media, as Jason Resnikoff, lecturer at Columbia University writes in his new publication "Labor's End". This ultimately makes us unpaid data slaves because the algorithms are only profitable thanks to private data of humans.

## **Harmful effects**

Particularly severe are the effects of this profit-based forming on children and adolescents who grow up with the respective mechanisms in place. Their socialization process is heavily influenced by algorithms which fail to incorporate meaningful pedagogic values. They are instead often deliberately designed to maximize metrics such as watch time or engagements to generate even more data, aligned with the business models of technology corporations. The “like” button often acts as a proxy for perceived recognition, in the sense that interactions with many likes are in turn shown to larger audiences. Underneath this lies the evolutionary wish for recognition within our group for the sake of survival. This dynamic leads to a release of dopamine, creating a very real risk of developing a strong dependency potential.

Adolescents growing up with social media are conditioned to seek out interhuman recognition in social media, de facto obligating them to manage a presence in social media. This is especially devastating during these early forming years, as experiences more suited to developing cognitive and social skills relevant in the real world take a back seat to superficial interactions in social media. Furthermore, the virtual setting of social media greatly exacerbates the hazard of bullying. The extent of these developments can be observed in different studies, for example in the rising incidence of youth depression and youth suicides observed over the last years, as different long-time investigations of youth psychology show.

## **Tender initial stages of cooperation**

That more stringent regulations are necessary seems to be commonly accepted. As Nathaniel Raymond, US-human rights activist and lecturer at Yale School of Public Health stated: “We need to regulate the handling of data, just like the use of safety belts in cars became mandatory”. So far, however, neither supranational bodies nor national parliaments have managed to implement effective measures. On the contrary, the political influence of technology corporations recently has grown, and policymakers lack access to the expert know-how needed to devise workable solutions. When new rules come into force, the corporations are usually already prepared to soften the impact of the regulations in a way that the profitable business models are not facing any major restrictions. According to Wolfgang Hoffmann-Riem, former German supreme court justice, these technology corporations arose mainly in a lawless environment, and their power nowadays exceeds that of many nation states.

Different approaches are currently under evaluation, such as projects to program ethical algorithms. Lab42 has taken this direction, aiming to develop artificial intelligence for the

benefit of humanity. The mechanisms of human intelligence should serve as a basis in this effort. A collaborative model is under development, being worked on by ethicists and programmers in concert, as Peter G. Kirchsclaeger, Professor of Ethics at the University of Lucerne and Head of the Ethics-Committee of Lab42, explains.

### **Human dignity as benchmark**

The development and effective implementation of ethically meaningful artificial intelligence and algorithms will take some time. This also includes algorithms that are adequately guided and controlled from a legal perspective. Until then, the legal interventions need to be strengthened immediately to prevent further escalation from the current level of profit-based socialization, data slavery, and youth suicides.

As a decisive basis for further elaboration the universally anchored protection of human dignity could serve within the legal framework of a free society. In concrete terms, this would mean a return to the original functionality of communication tools, abolishing the data-driven algorithms that commercially exploit us as humans. The Internet initially was a hub of idealistic pioneers using the network for collaborative aims, without a “data collection mania”. A renaissance of this purpose of the internet would be desirable. This requires drastic bans of machine technologies which are currently used to collect, process, and monetize private user data. These bans should make a decisive contribution in the short term to protecting privacy and putting a stop to the creeping degradation of humans into unpaid products.

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