

DISPUTATION CLXXXII

March 29, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

I am overjoyed to be returning to Mass Hall to see you all again. I hope everyone had a break that was not only restful but also **fun**. I was fortunate enough to visit, with some other Peucinians, our dear friend William Jennings Bryan in his new home of Toulouse, France. If you care to know, he is living a fabulous life and sends his regards.

This week, we tackle a timely question—the role of social media and its influence on our democracy.

RESOLVED: SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ARE UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

Affirmative: Henrik Ibsen '18

Negative: Brendan Murtha '21

I typed “[facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)” into my browser, as I do far too often, and saw the following, in order:

- A meme from “The Same Photo of the Vienna Circle Every Day but Only Noumenally”
- New York Times article about Stephen Colbert + John Bolton
- New Yorker article about Andy Clark
- L.L. Bean advertisement
- New York Times article about Jeremy Corbyn
- Onion article
- New York Times article about Donald Glover
- A New Yorker article about Kim Jong Un going to China

What’s wrong here? It appears that Facebook has decided that I would really like to see left-leaning journalism with the occasional philosophy meme thrown in. No conservative outlets on my feed, no photos of my friends and family or life updates from people (why I signed up for Facebook way back when), and nothing encouraging me to engage civically or challenging my views. Somehow, Facebook knows that my neck hurts and has been suggesting I buy a number of different neck-massaging devices. Bizarre.

What are the broader implications of what I’m seeing just on my own newsfeed? Are social media platforms limiting my worldview, exposing me to ideas I like and demanding my attention, and in doing so, weakening it? Does Facebook have my interests at heart when it decides what to show me—or its own? News reports over the last few months have revealed that Russians have [used Facebook to undermine the quality of political information](#) circulating amongst Americans in order to disrupt our democratic processes. The personal data we trust Facebook with was [leaked to Cambridge Analytica](#) for [use by the Trump campaign in targeting voters](#). Even if social media is secure and does protect our privacy, what we see is controlled by bad actors — business interests, political partisans, and foreign actors with ill intent—who will exploit our brains, attention, and time for their gross ends.

While all this was happening, people have been using Facebook—and other social media—to further their democratic engagement. Observers have noted the [important role Twitter and Facebook played](#) in helping to organize and promote the “March for our Lives” protests across the country. For students and other young people who don’t have a traditional platform to express their political views, social media has been a

democratic forum where *anyone* can [share their ideas and rally people together](#). And for activists often overlooked or treated unfairly by traditional news outlets, social media is a place to get their story out. [As DeRay Mckesson says](#): “Twitter allowed us to tell the story [of Ferguson] in real-time. It allowed us to take back the narrative and when CNN wasn’t saying anything and when MSNBC wasn’t talking about it we actually got to push the narrative anyway.”

Should we #DeleteFacebook? Is social media itself inherently conducive to suppressing democracy, or is it the specific platforms themselves that are corrupted? What does social media properly constructed look like—and is it something we find valuable for our political culture? I’m confused, Peucinians, and I’m hoping you can help me out.

Thursday, March 29, 8 p.m.*
Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-formal attire

PLSH,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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*We will be starting camaraderie at 8 p.m. so people have the opportunity to attend the [“Weaponization of Tech”](#) talk with Carrie Goldberg from 7-8 at Kresge Auditorium. It should be pertinent to our discussion tonight. I first read about Goldberg in the [New Yorker](#); she is doing very important work.

P.S. No disputation next week, April 5.

P.P.S. Less important, but I am really interested in this question and would love to hear your thoughts.

From the Bowdoin Academic and Social Code: “Academic Dishonesty includes but is not limited to (1) the receiving, giving, or using of any unauthorized assistance on any academic assignments, including but not limited to: quizzes, tests, written assignments, examinations or laboratory assignments; (2) referencing and/or using sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in preparing papers, constructing reports, solving problems or carrying out other academic assignments...”

Let’s say you are taking a difficult exam and begin praying to God for help. God hears your prayer and sends an angel down to your classroom. (No one else can see what is going on, obviously.) The angel reminds you of that formula you were forgetting or suggests a really good way to phrase your thesis, etc. Then the angel leaves. Have you engaged in academic dishonesty by receiving and using the unauthorized assistance of God?