

Annie Galvin (AG): Hello, and welcome back to *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm your host, Annie Galvin; I'm the associate editor at *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that's free and online. You can find our work at publicbooks.org.

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So, today we're talking about Facebook, arguably the platform that brought social networking into the mainstream. I think that Facebook is something that people have a lot of strong feelings about. It has over two billion users across the globe, and for many, it enables genuine connections across time and space. But it has also generated very real problems, in terms of how people talk to each other, and how companies and governments use it to their own advantage—often at the expense of us, its users.

My guest today is Siva Vaidhyathan, who has literally written the book on Facebook.

Siva Vaidhyathan (SV): I'm Siva Vaidhyathan. I am the Robertson Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia and the author of *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects us and Undermines Democracy*.

AG: What I love about Siva's work on Facebook is that he *validates* all of those feelings about it: the positives, as well as the criticisms. Siva has spent *many* years trying to crack through the surface of a company that—notoriously—does *not* want its surface to be cracked. So I'm really excited to have him here to help us unpack the many consequences of this massive social network that Mark Zuckerberg created in a Harvard dorm room in 2004.

[brief music break]

AG: So the first question that I meant to ask that we're asking everyone is what does being online feel like to you in 2020? So it can be a description, a metaphor, a word what does being online as Siva feel to you?

SV: Normal. And that's largely because there is no online/offline distinction anymore, right? I have a device that is connected to AT&T that sits either on my body or within arms' length of my body every minute of almost every day, right? And so it might as well be my body, it might as well be part of it, right? We are all cyborgs in that sense.

AG: Awesome, thank you. And so I think that we'll end up probably covering your work across multiple domains but I think that we'll most likely end up focusing today on the book that you just named, your book about Facebook. So I'm wondering if you could just for context give our listeners kind of a quick summary or elevator speech about what *Antisocial Media* is about?

SIVA: Yeah. So as I was looking around the world between about 2014 and let's say November 2016 I noticed a couple of disturbing trends. One of those was that politics as electoral politics specifically, seemed to be getting more Facebook dependent around the world and you know what, the United States was not the leading indicator of that I was watching the rise of the BJP in India, a very sort of neo-fascist, a religious nationalist party that had been in the opposition for many decades but has pretty much run India for most of the last two and a half decades. But most recently for the past five years has really run India with an iron fist. And the BJP rose along with the popularity of Facebook and the popular dependence on Facebook as a mode of personal communication and that from which we receive information about the world. So I was looking at that. I was watching the rise of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, I was watching the ways that a lot of the post-soviet states were fraying and their fragile democracies were being torn apart and a lot of it was happening because of what was happening on various social media platforms specifically Facebook which is the largest. So I've been watching all of that. I had been teaching classes on privacy and surveillance and for that I was collecting a lot of scholarship about Facebook for use in classes. And then in November 2016 like so many people shook me up and I was trying to figure out what possible use I am in the world and what good I am and what I could contribute and one of the things I realized was that I needed to tell this story of how globally we had become so dependent on Facebook for so much. And I wanted to look at all the ramifications of that and not just the ways it undermines democracy for which I think there is a very clear case. I think we also needed to concede the extent to which people have a personal relationship with and through Facebook and that is valuable. So at this point two and a half billion people use Facebook regularly around the world. They are not dupes. They are not fools. They get something of value out of it. So I wanted to explore both of those factors. The fact is Facebook is terrifically valuable for individuals and yet terrible for us collectively. Not unlike my car, right? My car is really nice for me it makes my life better, more convenient, right, makes everything easier, I'm a big fan of my car, has all the features I want. Our cars collectively are terrible for us.

AG: Right.

SIVA: So that was one conclusion. I think the stronger, larger, bigger conclusion the takeaway I wanted people to have from the book was that while Facebook is perhaps the best tool we have ever had for motivation whether that's personal or hobby based or political it is about the worst tool we've ever had for deliberation. And that democratic republics need tools that foster both motivation and deliberation. We've gone all in on motivation we need to do a lot more for deliberation.

AG: That's great thanks. And I definitely, we'll definitely get in to a lot more of those specifics and in particular that's a really useful – those are two really useful terms I think to think about motivation versus deliberation how they're different, how they work

together, and how Facebook has sort of splintered them in that sense. But I actually kind of want to start by zooming out quite a lot and thinking about Facebook's relevance even to people who don't actually use Facebook. You just said how there are about 2.5 billion Facebook users but of course there are about 7.7 billion people on the planet so there are a lot of people who don't actively log on. I think we're also seeing an increasing generational divide where older folks are on it a lot but Millennials like myself included have either deleted our profiles or don't use it as much and I'm pretty sure that to Gen Z Facebook is majorly uncool. So essentially there is a sector of people in the world who are not actively going onto Facebook.com all the time but I'm guessing that you would argue that Facebook still matters in a sense to those people because it's shifted the world in these really big ways. So can we start by addressing those people?

SIVA: Yeah.

AG: And I'm curious what you would say to those people if Facebook doesn't apply to my day-to-day life why is it important for me nonetheless to understand the influence that Facebook has had on the world?

SIVA: Okay. So let me start from the big number 7.4, 7.5 billion people around the world. Subtract 1.5 billion of those who live in China who can't get access to Facebook, right?

AG: Yeah.

SIVA: So at that point we're down to 5 billion. Right? Subtract another 2.9 billion who do not have the means or the technological foundation in their societies to engage with digital technology in any way. These are the poorest of the poor. They are concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, in parts of Asia, in parts of South America but scattered around the world, right, including many millions in the United States who just don't have the means. Understand that that number is actually shrinking pretty quickly maybe not this month but, you know, it's actually shrinking pretty quickly as well as the access to digital technology specifically phone based data drops consistently. And Facebook has a lot to do with that, right? So at that point we are close to 3 billion people. Now 3 billion people happens to be the number of regular users of all Facebook products and so not just what they call blue, the mothership of Facebook but Instagram and WhatsApp. So of the top six like the six most powerful, most popular social network platforms in the world four of them are owned by Facebook. They are in order Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger. The only two that are not owned by Facebook YouTube which is owned by Google which is number two at 1.9 billion. And WeChat which is the most popular and powerful social network service in China, right? So there's no direct competition between WeChat and Facebook. Understand that most people who use Facebook also use Instagram and also used WhatsApp and almost everybody who uses WhatsApp and Instagram have a Facebook account. The fact that

they're all one company means that this generational divide first of all we have to remember that, well, let me put to the side, first of all, I reject all generational labels I think there's no actual empirical support for any of those distinctions. But I would say that one thing we have seen is that younger people in North America have been deferring their Facebook registration and use. Deferring, not avoiding, right? Because 14-year-olds tend to become 25-year-olds it's something that happens, right? And Facebook is of more use to people who have loved ones in other cities. Cousins who are getting married, who have high school friends who now live in other countries and that tends to happen later in life. It is of more value to a grandparent than it is to a college student without a doubt and that's sort of because of how we've arranged ourselves and our activities on Facebook and the variety of features Facebook offers. When you own a home in a neighborhood Facebook becomes really valuable as part of staying in touch with your community. If you're part of a hobby group that requires or is best done over distance Facebook has more value. So really what we're seeing this idea of a generational lag first of all really is only North America. So we're talking about a very small slice of the world.

14-year-olds in India, 14-year-olds in South Africa, 14-year-olds in Kenya are signing up for Facebook as soon as they can because they need it. It's not just about doing Snapchat which by the way has fewer than a billion users and has plateaued. And about posting stories. It really is about being able to navigate your community and your family.

AG: Yeah, absolutely. And I think I definitely take all those points and I think part of what I was trying to get at was the way that Facebook as a corporation has had these kind of ripple effects the way that other media organizations operate and so we'll definitely get into that a bit when we start to talk about Facebook's business model and the way it's changed advertising and all of that. But thank you for that clarification.

SIVA: I would add just one other thing to that, right? So even if you don't have a Facebook account Facebook's tracking you. So if you're using any other service on your phone, if you have any Facebook owned apps like Instagram or WhatsApp Facebook is tapping into your phone, into your address book. They have a dossier on you. They know everything about you and they know everything about everybody like you. So it almost doesn't matter if you're not using Facebook, Facebook wins anyway.

AG: That's good to know. So my mom who has proudly never had Facebook if she's communicated with me on WhatsApp she's still being tracked essentially?

SIVA: Yeah. Absolutely.

AG: I'm sure she'll be comforted to know that. So just kind of picking up on what you said little bit about the good of Facebook, right, about the way that like a car it does provide a lot of sort of warm fuzzy convenient things for us. You write at the end of your

introduction that you say, “I’ve lived my life through Facebook. Facebook has been the operating system of my life.” And I’m wondering, I would love to hear from you a little bit more specifically about what has Facebook given you in a positive sense? How has it been something that has been alluring and you’ve kept coming back to over your life even as you’ve obviously started to learn about some of the darker aspects of it?

SIVA: Sure, sure. I think anybody just being able to keep up with family I’m a bit distant from, family who are not in my primary favorites in my phone list, right? cousins, second cousins, nieces and nephews knowing that they graduated at the top of their class, that they’ve got a new puppy, right? Those are good things. Those are the things that Facebook has made easier to do than ever. We lived fine before we had that constant flow of knowledge so it’s not like it’s crucial to us but we would miss it if we didn’t have it, right? And so that’s really valuable. I think Facebook has, you know, we all have anecdotes about the moment that Facebook meant something to us made something just a little bit easier. I mean one of the times I can tell you a story about how just in a local sense a few years ago the gym that I belong to had in one of the yoga classes a handgun fell out of a person’s bag and there was immediate uproar among the members like why is there a handgun in someone’s bag? And it turned out that the management had changed the policy basically allowing concealed handguns in the building none of us had been informed of this. There’s childcare in that building, this was certainly – and it’s yoga, right? It’s yoga why do you need a weapon in yoga, right? It seems very anti yoga, right? And not very om. So a lot of us immediately started organizing using Facebook and within two days we got our gym to change the policy. Now, prior to Facebook, in the absence of Facebook that organizational process would have been harder. Not impossible we probably could have done it in a week we would have had email and phone conversations and petitions and maybe a protest outside. As it turned out this barrage of Facebook activism that made hundreds of people call the office and complain changed the policy rather quickly. Again, Facebook was not necessary but it really helped and got the job done. Now, if I happened to be a member of a white supremacist organization I would have just the same amount of ease organizing a political action that might have scared the hell out of some people. So it just so happens I was against guns in that moment which was kinda good. So I don’t want to oversell it as this is a progressive process. It does mean though that if you want to get something done Facebook is terrifically powerful. Now I can just add one more thing my father just passed away and I announced his demise on Facebook as people do these days. I have found it to be a remarkably powerful and, I don’t know, “pleasant” is the wrong word, it’s hard to use a word like in the wake of losing someone. A warming process. And again not just because – Facebook has allowed so many of my friends to express their condolences and their appreciation and their love for me and for my family without having to text me or call me which I, you know, I love the texts and calls I got I’m glad I don’t have 200 of them, I’m glad I have ten of them, you know? And that’s nice, right?

it's a nice way to sort of manage these moments and it let me write a few sentences about him and there aren't a lot of platforms, there aren't a lot of means of communication that allow you to do something so personal and yet so public and sort of manage the public side of mourning quite so well. And really honor my father in a very effective and straightforward way. And so at this very moment I've spent much of the day on Facebook because I'm getting so much love out of it and I know my sisters are experiencing the same thing, my mother's experiencing the same thing. Again, before Facebook when I would lose a loved one it would feel like a lonelier experience, right? It's how we did things for centuries so it clearly wasn't that bad. But it's kinda nice.

AG: Yeah. Well, again I'm sorry to hear about your father.

SIVA: Thank you.

AG: And it's strange I actually had an extremely similar experience of that today too I lost a friend recently and did a similar thing where I posted and I was looking through the replies today and there is a way in which the strange way in which, and you write about this in your book, Facebook has changed our understanding of quote/unquote "friends" to also include these very loose ties it can actually be really nice in those moments. You know I had comments from my high school French teacher and someone who babysat my brother and me when we were kids and in a sense those messages are so meaningful too because it's not just my mom and my best friends but it's like wow actually there's this person who remembers me from high school French, and from when I was eight and who is thinking thoughts and who read that thing. So I think that's a perfect – the kind of gestures of public mourning I think is a perfect encapsulation of how Facebook can be really intimate and useful in consoling in moments.

AG: So we've been kind of talking about the warm and fuzzy aspects of it but I think that to understand some of the darker aspects as you show you really clearly in your book we really need to understand the business model, right? The way that I think that when we're on Facebook we experience as a surface, right, we see what we see but we're not really thinking about why material is being presented to us or what Facebook's incentives are for doing so. So in order to move into this territory I'm wondering can you just briefly explain Facebook's business model? So when we're flitting around liking things or commenting on really serious posts like the ones that you and I just described how is Facebook making money off of us? What's its business model?

SIVA: Right. Look, if you watch an episode of *Mad Men* you will see what advertising used to be, right? *Mad Men* is faith based advertising, right? It's storytelling, right? it's like this process of women in America really want this bra and they want this bra because they want this life and this bra will lead to this life and we're going to present a series of images and words and stories that promise fulfillment in life through this bra. ... So that

sort of stuff was common in the late 20th Century because every car dealer and every shoe store and every restaurant and every movie theater had to buy ads that might or might not have worked. Google and then Facebook created an advertising system that has two features. Number one, you never pay for an advertisement that does not generate a click of interest. Right? So there's actually something to measure. You don't have to pay for ads that hit people's eyes and don't make them do anything. Number two, the price of that ad is based on a complex algorithm and auction system and the third part of that is that the ad is always targeted to someone who has already expressed interest in that subject. So.

AG: Right.

SIVA: If I run a company that sells ostrich skin cowboy boots and my choice is to buy a quarter page ad in the local newspaper or let's say I'm based in Ft. Worth, Texas, right, so it's a city that has a lot of cowboy boot users per-capita relative to the rest of the company I could buy a quarter page ad in the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram* or I can go on Facebook and Facebook will help me identify the very sort of person who might buy ostrich skin cowboy boots, which by the way run between \$400-500 a pair. So they are a niche product and...Facebook and Google are the best ways to do it because they won't waste your money trying to find people who won't buy ostrich skin cowboy boots.

AG: Right. And you also show in your book just to add something that you can also filter people out, right, because to be advertising them to –

SIVA: That's right.

AG: -- vegans, you know, or anti leather crusaders. So just the degree of micro targeting that is possible by the filtering is what is really unprecedented.

SIVA: That's right. In addition you can use that advertising system to narrow your audience to highly specialized people by picking attributes. You can even pick gender and religion and political attitude in all these different ways. So if you're trying to advertise this podcast for instance you can go onto Facebook advertising and find people with a certain level of education, or people who have expressed interest in certain subjects and very accurately find an audience of 3,000 to 5,000 people who might benefit from hearing about this podcast. Now the other way to do it is and the way that most political campaigns do it and many products do it is they will have an email list. Like if I run a boot shop on Ft. Worth I'm going to have an email list of customers who have come in. And it might be 200 people long or 2,000 people long. And I can take that email list and put it in a spreadsheet and upload it to Facebook and Facebook will generate what it calls a look-a-like audience. People with the exact same attributes as the people who are likely to walk in my shop. And I might start with 2,000 mail addresses but they could generate as many as 10,000 more names for me, maybe more around the country and then I can

directly go after those people regardless of whether they live in Seattle or Maine and they are much more likely to want my boot than someone I just peppered. Or someone I even attracted demographically.

AG: Right. And so I think that if we're talking about the advertising aspect of it I think someone could listen to what you're saying and say you know that's great, I mean everyone wins, right? I get marketed just the stuff I want and the companies can be more efficient in how they allocate their advertising budget so that's great, right? so I'm wondering if you can then help us understand how that translates to some of the things that start to feel disconcerting that you write at length in your book about whether it's our filter bubbles, our confirmation bias ... our information ecosystems being fundamentally shaped in a new way by Facebook.

SV: Right, right. All these years I was growing up in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall I kept hearing that capitalism and commerce were not only compatible with democracy but sort of they were co-evolutionary, right? They were running together and as soon as we introduced market economics to China it will become democratic, right? I think we've pretty much unraveled that completely and Facebook shows it really strongly as does Google, right? So what is great for selling ostrich skin cowboy boots which is also really great for selling Donald Trump or Joe Biden, you know, is not necessarily good for democracy. What makes commerce more efficient and advertising more efficient is actually counterproductive for democracy because democracy demands different things. We in a democratic republic want people to be able to hold their candidates and their political organizations accountable. So not to idealize the era of television and radio advertisements but at least if I were running for city council and I – let's say I'm in Charlottesville, Virginia which is where I live, right? And there are a lot of small businesses, at least there were a month ago, and I'm running for mayor or for city council and I decide that I want to unfairly target my opponent as a shoplifter or pro shoplifting, right? And I decide to run like radio ads or television ads saying you know Annie Galvin my opponent is a notorious shoplifter and I put those ads up on television and radio. Well, the next day Annie Galvin and all of our people know about it and they're immediately striking back at me. The local newspaper, the local radio they're all coming after me for making this thing up. There's some accountability there. It may not be effective accountability but there's – you know, and we can actually have that feedback system, right? But if I were to do that on Facebook or Facebook ads and only target small businesses and say, you know what, you should watch out for this Galvin, we got a problem here, some shoplifting issues, right?

AG: Yeah, yeah.

SV: Those ads would disappear, they're ephemeral, only the people who might be swayed by those ads would even know they existed. I could deny them. That in itself is bad and we

know that the Trump campaign in 2016 poured out thousands of highly specific targeted ads at African American communities around the country especially in Pennsylvania and Michigan and Wisconsin trying to reduce enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton and all you have to do is knock a few thousand people away from voting on Tuesday and lo and behold you can swing a state. There were ads targeted very specifically at men of Haitian descent in South Florida reminding them that Bill Clinton had gone to Haiti after the last earthquake and promised all these reforms and all that they got was cholera. That was a pretty powerful message to send to men of Haitian descent who might already be reticent about voting for a woman for president. And again all you need is a few thousand. Florida went to Trump by about 110,000 votes. The entire Electoral College was settled by three states, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania by 78,000 votes. You move a thousand votes here or there with a small targeted ad to a specific segment of the electorate and all you have to convince them not to vote for the other person or get a thousand new people to vote for you and who knows you could swing a state like Wisconsin which was razor thin, it was less than 1% that decided Wisconsin. Right? So that kind of stuff, that's really bad for democracy not just because Trump won that's a whole other story, it's bad for democracy because our candidates and their communication with voters should be accountable for criticism and response. So that's one of the big problems with the way this advertising systems undermines democracy.

AG: Right. Yeah, and that was kind of a revelation that I experienced from your book. I think a lot of the kind of discourse around Facebook and the election was about these bots and trolls had really fiercely motivated people to do something actively but the idea that it's so easy to actually dissuade people from doing something like voting, right, it's in a sense easier to just nudge people to stay at home, right, than it may be is to throw their support behind someone that that dissuading nudge can be just as consequential. So I thought that was a really interesting kind of just like a slightly different frame for looking at Facebook's effect on the election that I hadn't thought about before.

SV: Yeah. It's also important to get beyond an election, right? Elections attract our attention because they matter, right, I mean Donald Trump's president and the whole world's falling apart as a result so it's real easy to go, oh, my God, what happened when Trump – and tell the story on Facebook on Trump. And in this book I tried to do bigger stuff than that. I think the long term effects are what we really should worry about, right? Had Hillary Clinton run a better campaign on Facebook she might be president today. Maybe Joe Biden will get it together and he will be president. It won't change the fact that Facebook is bad for democracy. It won't change the fact that no matter who works Facebook effectively ultimately Facebook guides our immediate ecosystems, structures the ways that television and other forms of media decide how to present stories of what to present and what emotional cues to trigger, right? All of that is changing because of Facebook. All of that undermines our ability to deliberate soberly and maturely about the

problems we face and ultimately all of that shenanigans we saw in 2016, the Russian interference, right, yes, it was hoping to move people toward voting for Trump or against Clinton but the larger goal which is their long term gain and it's not just Russians there are lots of domestic forces trying to do this too and we see it coming from the White House right now is to just make us give up. Make us give up on the potential of actually using democratic politics to solve problems and enhance people's lives even among people who differ, right? And that is what we're really in danger of losing and we see it happening in the Philippines and we see it happening in India and Brazil and we see it happening in the United States and Hungary and Poland and it's really bad.

AG: Yeah. I mean I think that's a really key point that it's not necessarily that Facebook is tipping the scales the way that we like or we don't but it's these bigger institutions that are being lost. And it's interesting what you were just saying because I feel that I've been a little bit of a victim to that because when I hear you say terms like "democracy" and "deliberation" and "civil participation," those terms have actually started to feel very abstract and almost undefined in a way so I would love to ask you if you could just really specifically pinpoint like what are top let's say three qualities of democracy? What do you see as democracy that is being lost by Facebook? Three might not be enough. But I've forgotten what democracy is apparently so --.

SV: Well, look at its most abstract democracy is a system of government that is responsive to the will and concerns of the voters. ...Deliberative democracy or republican democracy essentially, right, the notion that we can have institutions that help us convene and vet our differences and our disagreements and work towards something, some response that makes sense to a problem. So one of the examples I like to bring up when I give talks about this is that in 1969 the Cuyahoga River outside of Cleveland caught on fire and it wasn't the first river fire in the 20th Century in fact there had been many but in 1969 the country was ready to hear and think about it and ready to be appalled by it. Most importantly it was the last river fire of the 20th Century. And one of the reasons it was the last river fire of the 20th Century is that people cared enough so between 1969 and 1972 Congress passed the Clear Air Act and the Clean Water Act and started the EPA and President Nixon a free market Republican signed all of those into law. And we as a country took seriously the problem of water pollution and decided that even though many of us supported free market responses and many of us supported state based responses and other supported tort based restrictions on companies that polluted we had to do something. And we worked through those arguments. Congress worked through those arguments. We created the structure of the EPA ... all of that happened because in 1969 for all of its faults this country was able to talk about a problem in a mature and informed way without being flustered by sophistry, without being we would think of it as trolling, trolling to you know, people could actually argue it out in I don't know, "good faith" may be too strong, argue it out without having to be swept away. But right now like that was

one river on fire, right now the whole world is on fire and we can't get to step two for talking about the way to respond to that because every time we want to talk about it we get swept away by sophistry, by trolls who want to make us prove again that the problem exists. And this is insanity. And Facebook's not the reason but Facebook is a part of the problem.

AG: Right. And that's to me starts to kind of echo what you were talking about at the very beginning about motivation versus deliberation. And I think ...And I think I'm sure that when you have these conversations the natural final question is what do we do about it?

SV: Yeah.

AG: And you've written extensively in *The Guardian* and a little bit in your conclusion and elsewhere about the capacities we might have to regulate or to design policy to break up some of these big companies. But I'd actually like to ask the question a little bit different. And if you could just kind of wave a wand and just change Facebook, just make it look different, make it behave differently than it currently does what would you change kind of from a design perspective and operational engineering perspective? Like what would your ideal vision of Facebook be that would both allow you to grieve your father and see the nephew who was valedictorian but that would also actually promote these values of democracy that you've described so eloquently?

SV: So if I worked for the company I would have an imperative to continue to do what's best for Facebook and therefore I wouldn't change much. I would actually keep it being just as destructive, right?

AG: That's so depressing.

SV: I mean that's the way it is, right? Nobody who works for these companies has an incentive to do anything against the interest of these companies. Which is why we have the state, right? We have the state to regulate and limit the negative externalities of whether that negative externality is water pollution that starts a fire in the river or a negative externality is idea pollution that undermines democracy....But if I had a magic wand it would be a policy wand and I would severely restrict the ways in which companies could track and keep data about our interests and behaviors. I would severely limit because this would not be a First Amendment problem, I would severely limit what companies could find out about us and how long they could keep it. To the point where it would decrease their ability to respond to us through the newsfeed, through the YouTube recommendation engine, and through their advertising platforms. This would have the secondary effect of making these companies poorer, they would have to fight harder but it would level the playing field in the advertising world a bit if we still have newspapers coming out of this depression, you know, maybe they might have a little bit more of a chance to compete and build their own advertising systems rather than have all the money

rush to Facebook and Google but more than that it would mean that no company like Facebook or Google could ever leverage a decade or more of private information that gives them an inherent and unfair advantage over any insurgent company. If you want to make the next Facebook you can't because you don't have a decade of personal information to build upon to build these services, right? And then tell advertisers, and then tell people they should spend time with it because it will be more satisfying, it just won't. Right? So there aren't a lot of policy tools we're going to use. Antitrust is actually a lot weaker than people seem to think in this matter and I haven't yet seen a model of what an effective antitrust intervention with Facebook or Google would be. Data protection in the European sense is already starting to seem to be inadequate. I think we need a much more bold and more radical approach. In the political realm there is one reform I would love to see congress put forth no one's really taken it seriously and our doubt our congress is going to take it seriously soon. But that is basically – and this would not be a First Amendment problem if properly structured. No campaign ad should be allowed to be targeted at any group smaller than the district in which the election is running. So if you and I were running against each other for city council I cannot aim an ad at African Americans and exclude everybody else. I cannot aim an ad at women and exclude everybody else. I cannot aim an ad at small business owners and exclude everybody else. All of my ads must be structured for the electorate at large and must appeal to the electorate at large. Right?

AG: Yeah.

SV: Making micro targeting in political ads illegal should totally be legit. Now who knows what this current Supreme Court would do with that but whatever, you know, it's worth a shot because that would mitigate a lot of the problems with the ways political ads work. But again that is only one small problem of all of the antidemocratic effects that Facebook has on the world.

AG: Yeah, I have not heard that one and I think that's really interesting. I mean it goes back to the point about accountability I mean at least you have to be accountable to a community outside the very narrow community that you're able to target currently.

SV: Right.

AG: So let's get behind that. So I just had two more questions, quick questions to ask that we're asking all of our guests. I actually forgot to ask you the very first one so I'll ask you the closing question then I'll ask you the beginning one that I forgot to ask.

SV: Great.

AG: But the closing question is, What do you think is the next big question that we need to be asking and think about as we study what platforms like Facebook are doing to society and democracy?

SV: Yeah... The fact is Facebook and Google and Microsoft and Amazon and Apple they all want to be the operations system of our lives going forward. They're not struggling any more to be the operating system of our phones or our computers. That's done. They want to be the governance of our thermostats, of our refrigerators, of cars, or our clothes, of our eyeglasses, of our insulin pumps, right? They want to be embedded in every part of our lives. There is no online/offline distinction anymore and everybody in Silicon Valley knows it and they know that once you have data flowing through everything everything is governable they want to have that monopoly power. ... The big question for us is how can we defend ourselves against these big powerful oligopolies that are struggling to become the operating system of our lives? ... I think that is the big challenge of the next two decades. I think our current public health and economic crisis makes that an even harder fight than it was just a few months ago. These companies are going to become more important. They may be the only ones standing in some fields and it's going to become more imperative to distill this argument as not about fake news and not about privacy per se, it is about the operating system of our lives. Is that operating system going to be our human societies, families, and individual minds? Or is it going to be Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Apple or some combination?

AG: Yeah, that's great. Hopeful it would be more persuasive to frame it as such I mean at the risk of sounding melodramatic but it really an issue of our humanity.

SV: Yes.

AG: This is all the question about the choices, the agency that we have to maneuver through the world and through our lives and it's not just the fact that we're staring at our phones too much it's vastly expanded beyond that. So I really appreciate that.

thank you so much for your time. This has been super fascinating and I think it ties in with a lot of stuff that we've been thinking about at *Public Books* and obviously the stuff you've been writing about. So we really, really appreciate it a lot so thank you.

SV: Oh, my pleasure.

[brief music break]

AG: And that's our show! A huge thank you to Siva Vaidhyanathan for sharing his thinking about the significance of Facebook in the modern age. You can find links to his work at publicbooks.org/podcast. There you'll also find an interview with Siva from our series *Public Thinker*, as well as a list of further readings, curated by our guests, in case you

want to read further or use this material in your classes. You can follow this show, and Public Books, @PublicBooks on Twitter to learn more about the work we do. (I promise there will be more deliberation than motivation on our feeds.) We'd be so grateful if you would subscribe to the show in Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or Pocket Casts. And if you like the show, please tell a friend, or even a few friends!

Next time on *Public Books 101*, I talk to the brilliant scholar Alice Marwick, whose work has covered basically everything interesting about the internet. We talk about why it feels like smartphones are listening to us, even though Alice thinks they probably aren't, and also about how privacy violations impact marginalized communities in particular. So I hope you'll join me for the next episode of *Public Books 101: The Internet*, as we continue to wonder: What is the internet doing to societies?

This podcast is a production of *Public Books*, in partnership with the Columbia University Library's Digital Scholarship Division. Thank you to Michelle Wilson at the library for partnering with us on this project. This episode was produced by me, Annie Galvin, with production assistance from Jess Engebretson and Kelley Deane McKinney. It was edited by Jess Engebretson. Our theme music was composed by Jack Hamilton. Special thanks to the editorial staff of *Public Books* for their support for this project, and to the Mellon Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies, where I am a public fellow. Thank you for listening, and I hope to see you next time.