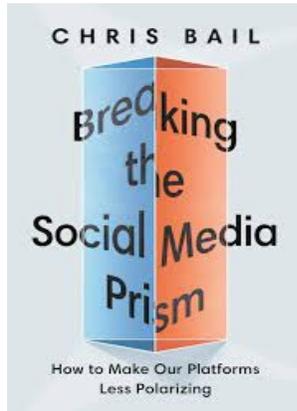


Chris Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How To Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).



Chris Bail is a computational social scientist and professor of sociology at Duke University. He directs the Polarization Lab at Duke. He pushes back against the “Silicon Valley apostates” who claim that technology’s algorithms on various social media platforms have engineered an unprecedented influence over human psychology. Common wisdom claims we are trapped in echo chambers that shape how we think, feel and vote. Our beliefs and behavior are manipulated by social media (9). Bail observes “a much more unsettling truth: the root source of political tribalism on social media lies deep inside ourselves. . . . In an era of growing social isolation, social media platforms have become one of the most important tools we use to understand ourselves—and each other” (10).

Social media is more instrumental in shaping identity than it is in shaping ideas. Bail’s thesis: “Social media is more like a prism that refracts our identities [than a mirror that reflects our identities] – leaving us with a distorted understanding of each other and ourselves. The social media prism fuels status-seeking extremists, mutes moderates who think that there is little to be gained by discussing politics on social media, and leaves most of us with profound misgivings about those on the other side, and even the scope of polarization itself” (10).

Social media reflects and refracts our views; it does not shape them. Escaping the echo chamber does not invoke introspection. It does not convince us that there are two sides to every story. It does not humanize us and it does not cause us to push back against extremists on our side (38-39). Neither does our social media profile give others a good sense of who we are. We use social media to project an image. Bail argues we present different versions of ourselves “in varied social settings to figure out which ones ‘work’ (48). We care about “our identities because they give us something that we all strive for: a sense of self-worthThe sense of superiority that we derive from categorizing people into groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’ fulfills our intrinsic need for status. . . .Our ability to hide certain aspects of our identity and highlight others is highly constrained in real-life interactions, but social media gives us much more flexibility to present carefully curated versions of ourselves” (49-50).

Social media enables us to perform different identities, “observe how other people react, and update our presentation of self to make us feel like we belong.” Bail says, “The great tragedy of social media, which has critical implications for political polarization, is that it makes our tendency to misread our social environment even worse. We use social media platforms as if they were a giant mirror that can help us understand our place within society. But they are more like prisms that bend and refract our social environment—distorting our sense of ourselves, and each other. The social media prism exerts its most profound influence when people are not aware that it exists” (53).

The morally awakened “Silicon apostates” rightly claim that algorithms and echo chambers manipulate the unsuspecting social media user, but the sociologist claims that the status-seeking,

identity-needy user is an even bigger manipulative factor than the algorithms.

Social media tends to normalize extremism (online radicalism and in-person politeness) even as it mutes moderates. Bail writes, “Extremists turn to social media because it provides them with a sense of status that they lack in their everyday lives, however artificial such status might be. But for moderates. . .the opposite is often true. Posting online about politics simply carries more risk than it’s worth” (77).

Should I delete my account? Bail responds:

“The most important reason we are not able to delete our accounts, I think, is what I’ve been arguing throughout this book. Social media have become so deeply woven into the fabric of our lives that they are beginning to shape our identities. Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms allow us to present different versions of ourselves; monitor how other people react to them with unprecedented speed and efficiency; and revise our identities accordingly. For tech apostates . . .the source of our addiction is much more mundane: the endorphins that are released when we see bright flashy things on our screens, or the sheer convenience of purchasing consumer products that are usefully placed in our social media feeds. I don’t completely disagree — Silicon Valley has clearly hacked some of the dopamine receptor channels in our brains – but I don’t believe that quitting social media is like quitting smoking. . . Instead, deleting our accounts would require a fundamental reorganization of social life. Social media are now so much a part of our friendships, families, and professional lives that it would require unseen coordination to fight against these tools that satisfy our deepest social instincts so seamlessly” (88-89).

It is at this point that Chris Bail turns to the issue of social isolation, which may be an even bigger problem than the problems presented by social media. Bail pushes back against the “Silicon Valley apostates,” including Roger McNamee, early advisor to Mark Zuckerberg (Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe), Nir Eyal, the architect for addictive technology (Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life), and Tristan Harris, Google VP, who has launched a movement to force technology companies to stop their manipulative practices. Bail is sympathetic to their concerns but questions whether social media platforms “have the power to shape out innermost thoughts” (92).

“Are we just simple dupes, victimized by algorithms or addictive platforms that control our beliefs and behavior without us knowing? People who are searching for scapegoats to blame for the deterioration of public debate may find these ideas seductive — and they are particularly compelling when they come from the same people who helped build the platforms. But why are we counting on the same people who helped create the problem to find the solution?” (93)

Chris Bail argues we are giving too much clout to algorithms, radicalization, fake news, and echo chambers, when it comes to explaining social and political polarization. He suggests that these are

basically distractions from the real issues that shape identity and beliefs. He proposes that we hack the social media prism by (1) becoming aware of the gap between perception and reality. He argues that we have exaggerated political polarization and we ought to be more intentional about seeking common ground. (2) Evaluate your online identity and your offline identity. How do people on social media see you? Is your social media profile in line with who you really are? (3) Seek common ground among people who are in your latitude of acceptance. Bail writes, “If you find the views of most people you encounter from the other side to be appalling, you might not be seeing people within your latitude of acceptance” (109). Learn to listen to the other side. (4) Examine your perspectives. “Consider performing some introspection about your own side before questioning the beliefs of others” (112). “Turning a critical eye on one’s own party may convince people to open up the cognitive space necessary to begin listening, or see the possibility of compromise more clearly” (113).

What is the purpose of social media platforms?

Bail asks, “Is it any wonder that people find themselves so rudderless on social media, when there is no common purpose for posting in the void?” (128)

The purpose of Facebook is allegedly to “bring the world closer together.” “But the platform began as a sophomoric tool that Harvard undergraduates used to rate each other’s physical attractiveness.” Twitter’s motto is “serve the public conversation,” “but it was reportedly built to help groups of friends broadcast SMS-style messages to each other.” Instagram says its purpose is to “capture and share the world’s moments,” but the app was originally called ‘Burbn’ (as in the drink) and was built to help people make plans to hang out with their friends” (128).

Bail asks, “Should we really expect platforms that were originally designed for such sophomoric or banal purposes to seamlessly transform themselves to serve the public good?” (128).

Bail suggests building social media platforms “tied to a more noble purpose” and government funded that reward bipartisanship and civility (128). Bail calls for depolarization platforms that instructs users in language that promotes understanding and helps people reach across the aisle. Bail suggests, “Recommender algorithms could be trained to identify each user’s latitude of acceptance – based on the content they like or who they follow – and encourage people to connect with people whose views are different, but not too different from their own.” This all seems fairly idealistic, especially after his own research into identify issues that he suggests are independent of social media. If social media is not the ultimate problem, it may not be the ultimate solution.