

comm·unity

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Confronting Facebook at the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture



by Christine Nappi

In a time of whistle-blowers and misinformation, communicating the impacts Facebook has on the population is now a more crucial task than ever. This was the topic of Siva Vaidhyathan's talk titled, "Making Meaning Through Facebook: A Semantic and Visual Culture Tour Through Social Media," at the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture on October 1. The talk was held in conjunction with the Institute of General Semantics at The Players Club in New York City.

Vaidhyathan, author of *Anti Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, spoke about how

Facebook has grown into a massive media entity capable of deteriorating democracy and negatively influencing the way we think about ourselves.

Thom Gencarelli, Professor, Communication Department, attended the talk alongside other faculty and student volunteers from the department. He thoroughly enjoyed the talk and described how Vaidhyathan urged members of the audience to take a closer look at the impacts of social media.

"In his talk, he encouraged people to consider how technologies [and] social media have shaped the way we think and what we can do to foster a new internet ecosystem that is designed to benefit the world and everything in it," Gencarelli said.

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he spoke about the idea of 'algorithmic amplification,' which deals with how misinformation is spread as a result of Facebook's algorithm.

"Things that are true don't spread very widely and very quickly," Gencarelli said. "Things that are bald-faced lies don't spread very far and very quickly. Things that are fuzzy in the middle are the things that spread like wildfire."



Vaidhyanathan's talk was given days before former Facebook employee and whistle-blower Frances Haugen told lawmakers that the platform is perpetuating hate speech, violence, and misinformation. She noted how Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, is particularly harmful for the influence it has on eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide amongst teen girls.

"The thing I saw at Facebook over and over again was there were conflicts of interest between what was good for the public and what was good for Facebook," said Haugen in [an article from CBS News](#). "And Facebook, over and over again, chose to optimize for its own interests, like making more money."

Haugen's testimony came at a critical time for Vaidhyanathan's lecture, making his talk all the more timely. Vaidhyanathan further elaborated on his lecture in conjunction with Haugen's testimony in an article in [The Guardian](#).

"Facebook may not deliberately spread divisive and destructive posts," Vaidhyanathan said.

"But it's in the design anyway. So it happens, and Facebook knows it happens. But to stop it, Facebook would have to completely redesign itself and abandon its original sin: a commitment to maximize engagement and growth. Zuckerberg would never do that."

Gencarelli agreed with Vaidhyanathan's point that Facebook is concerned with engagement numbers at the expense of its users.

"Mark Zuckerberg...invented this thing that he does not understand. It's a Frankenstein's monster that he can no longer control," Gencarelli said. "There has never been any communication or media industry entity that has that kind of reach. Ever." ★

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