INTERVIEW

Psychologists on the Case of Social Networking

Aaron Balick is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [**RH**]: Aaron, it's very exciting for me to have the honour of interviewing you on a subject that has concerned me for some years, and on which you are such an authority – that of social networking and the technologies that accompany it. Readers may remember that I reviewed your important book *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking* in a previous issue of our online magazine (House, 2019a) – and they might also recognise you as a previous book reviews editor of *Self & Society*. Welcome back! Can I ask you, first, to say something about your own involvement in the social-networking realm, and how and at what point you realised that there were issues with it that really call for a deeper engagement than mainstream culture typically recognises.

Aaron Balick [**AB**]: Hi Richard, thank you very much for having me. It's great to be doing something with *Self & Society* after all this time. Though my theoretical interests have taken me in the direction of contemporary psychoanalysis over the years, my beginning in humanistic/integrative work still deeply informs my practice – so it's great to be back in touch with my origins.

My journey into applications of psychotherapy thinking on to contemporary phenomena goes way back, and its application to technology and social media is really only the most recent iteration of that. I was very lucky in that my early work as a psychotherapist was in environments where the rigid ways in which many of us are trained to work (how we manage boundaries, 50-minute sessions, creating reflective space, object constancy, etc.) were difficult to employ well. My first job was in a busy Further Education college where it was difficult to get young people to commit to counselling sessions as we'd been trained to offer them. Unfortunately, in those early days I was not as flexible as I am today, and frankly it took me too long to move from desperately trying to shoehorn those students into my training models rather than adapting, as necessary, to make it more suitable for them. This was good learning for me, but I do carry some regrets that I wasn't more responsive to needs on the ground. Of course we need to maintain boundaries and the principles of our profession, but we also need to be flexible to changing societies and the different sorts of people we work with.

After cutting my teeth in that challenging environment, I had the good fortune to offer my therapeutic skills through the BBC – first, through their public-service website for teens as an agony uncle, and later for Radio 1 on their phone-in surgery show (I hold the accolade as their longest-serving mental-health expert). There, I learned that though psychotherapy cannot be carried out on a website or the radio, we can take our learnings from the consulting room and share them more widely in other ways that huge numbers of the public can benefit from. So you could say that from the very beginning, I've been challenged to take psychotherapy outside of the therapy room, and apply it more widely with reference to the realities on the ground.

Having said all this, my foray into technology started in the more traditional setting of the consulting room. Way back in 2005 one of my clients Googled me, which provoked a

therapeutic reaction that we had to work through together. At that time there was little guidance as to what to do in such situations. I worked through this with my client, and wrote what might be one of the earliest clinical papers about psychotherapy and new media called 'TMI in the transference LOL: psychoanalytic reflections on Google, social networking, and "virtual impingement"' (Balick, 2012).

While I was able to gain therapeutic knowledge from an in-depth exploration of this event, I also concluded that my client and I had the benefit of exploring these details because we were in therapy together. The vast majority of people out in the world were likely to have similar experiences with technology, without the benefit of working out the details with their therapist! So that's when I decided it would be great to write a book that applied those findings for a general public understanding. My book *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking* (Balick, 2013a) was not intended to be exclusively for therapists (it's not a clinical guide), but for the general public who wanted to know more about the psychological elements underlying their engagement with social media. Sadly, the feedback has been that my book can be at times quite impenetrable, and relies a lot on specialist language – so it hasn't quite had the reach I would have hoped (I intend to remedy this in a revised edition – referred to again later). I have, however, had the opportunity to do numerous public talks and more accessible pieces on the subject that are more widely consumed.

Since the book's publication, social media has grown more and more, and now more than ever, I think that a depth-psychological approach to it is a crucial part of the public dialogue. While I believe we can do a lot of work on this as therapists, taking our understanding outside the consulting room in accessible ways that are applicable to decision makers and the public has become more and more important to me. Paradoxically, therapists are still outliers when it comes to using and understanding social media, which at times can make us less helpful to our clients than we would like to be. Social media, whether we like it or not, is ubiquitous in today's society – and the reason why is that it's *social*, which makes it psychological, and hence of interest to us. It may not be the most beneficial way to connect with others, but this shouldn't stop us from trying to understand it better and engaging in public debate. So more and more, I encourage other therapists to do so, while at the same time working directly with public audiences and developers to think more coherently and ethically about it.

RH: I realise it's a bit off-topic, Aaron, as we're meant to be speaking about social networking and ICT here; but I just wanted to acknowledge what you say about flexibility, and how interesting I found your reflections on this issue. When working as a therapist, I was never comfortable with what is arguably a rigidity in the realm of therapy practice and its obsessions with the sanctity of the 'therapeutic frame' (what elsewhere I've termed 'the Professionalised Therapy Form' – House, 2003). After all my training and reading about pathological rigidity in Wilhelm Reich, and the virtue of flexibility and creativity in Winnicott, it was a great relief to me back in the 1990s when I discovered the work of Franz Alexander, who was intelligently addressing these issues way back in the 1940s (e.g. Alexander, 1971; see also Alexander & French, 1946). I can feel the pull into talking about the professionalisation of therapy and its effects – but I'll resist!

So, back to our theme. It's unfortunate that your excellent book hasn't had greater reach. Speaking from some personal experience here, writing about complex psychological and psychoanalytic ideas for a more 'popular' audience isn't at all easy – and I think very few therapists/analysts manage to pull it off well-enough. But it's a learning curve for all of us – and it's great to read that you've had opportunities to do public talks and more accessible pieces on the subject, and that these are more widely received.

Before we venture into some more involved questions around the specifically psychological dynamics of these technologies, Aaron, can you just say whether you have more accessible/popular written/published material available, and if so, how we can access it? And have you had the opportunity to speak about these technologies on your Radio 1 appearances? And if so, how has what you've had to say been received?

And will the 2nd edition of your book try to address this issue of accessibility and reach? – and indeed, how is the new edition coming along? I for one can't wait for it to appear!

AB: A few years ago I had the great fortune of taking on the Stillpoint Spaces project, which is an innovative international organisation that, to use our tagline, aims to 'Explore psychology, in depth, inside and outside the consulting room'. So what was once a passion has been a vocation, and I'm now able to lead a project that offers traditional psychotherapy alongside more public 'explorations' on an ongoing basis. While we do offer CPD, most of our events are open to 'psychologically curious' members of the public, and we cover hard-hitting contemporary issues from race and politics, to technology and banned Instagram filters!

Taking up this role was very much connected my long history of developing 'accessible' material. So certainly, work on BBC Radio 1 was hugely influential. I have written about this experience in 'The radio as good object: an object relational perspective on the curative and protective factors of a BBC public service broadcast for young people' (Balick, 2013b). These are what I call applications of psychotherapy thinking to culture – it's not so much doing psychotherapy over the airwaves as it is drawing on those principles and putting them into action differently.

Looking back, 2013 was a busy year! It was the year of that paper and also the year of the publication of my *Psychodynamics of Social Networking* book and *Keep Your Cool* (2013c). In fact, I wrote *Keep Your Cool* in the short period between completing *Psychodynamics* and receiving the comments from the editor! It was a big twist, writing something so dense to writing something so simple and straightforward. You could say that the latter was more difficult in some ways. Since the book had to be written for 11–15 year olds, I had to dispense with a lot of theory and stick to things that could be applied simply by young people, so it leans much more heavily towards CBT. It was also important for me to normalise a whole series of things that are important to teens, including sexual and gender identity, which I felt was crucial to include in a general self-help book, rather than a separate specialist book for 'sexual and gender minorities'.

Since that time I have participated in a lot of media that shares ideas from psychotherapy with worldly concerns, and it has become my *schtick*, I guess. When commissioned to write *The Little Book of Calm* (2018), I was originally asked to write a short accessible pocket-book on anxiety. I must say, I was not (and am still not) entirely happy with the title that was ultimately chosen. It is also the title of a previous *Little Book of Calm* that is the butt of a sketch from the television show *Black Books* (Google it), and I feel it's a bit dismissive of the issue of anxiety, and conveys that it may be a little book of clichés! I lost the fight for the title, as it's part of a 'little book' series that includes *The Little Book of Confidence* and *The Little Book of Wisdom.*

Anyway, this book was also hard to write because I was limited to under 180 words for each small essay, and I was working very hard to make it not be a cliché! I didn't want it to mention 'me time', lavender, or bubble baths! I do, in fact… – but only as a joke. It really is a book of condensed psychological wisdom – but it is indeed a challenge to condense such wisdom into such tiny essays. Feedback from the book, however, has been good, and people find they can pick it up and put it down – and apply it to their lives.

I have taken this book on the road to industry, doing a whole series of 'Calm at Work' seminars that apply emotional intelligence, mindfulness and clinical psychology to the work-place. I think people appreciate that the information is coming from a good source, but delivered with humour and a degree of irreverence, which deconstructs many of the stigmas that psychotherapy and mental-health work carry. I would like to see our profession doing more of this as a whole. I think it wouldn't hurt to have a Public Perception of Psychotherapy Tzar to deconstruct these sorts of things for the public as a whole. It is what we try to do at Stillpoint Spaces – but I'd like to see it rolled out across the profession as a whole.

RH: That's an impressive list of cultural engagements, Aaron! It's helped me realise that many if not most working therapists probably just don't know about the degree of work that therapists are doing out in the world, beyond the usual consulting-room work. Being able to 'condense psychological wisdom' is a real art, and it's desperately important that the sometimes rarefied world of Therapy can engage effectively with the wider society in this way – especially as 'deconstructing stigmas' is another essential precondition, if therapy and counselling help is to become more culturally acceptable and so more widely available. And heaven knows, there's surely going to be a massive demand for therapeutic help resulting from the mental-health issues spawned by the coronavirus pan(dem)ic.

I can feel myself wanting to ask you all kinds of questions about this work – but I'll drag myself back on topic. As you mentioned earlier, social media has grown considerably over the 7–8 years since your book came out, and this makes a depth-psychology perspective arguably ever-more important. You also said that 'Social media, whether we like it or not, is ubiquitous in today's society'. Well almost… (I want to say) – for there does exist a small minority of us (and, I fancy, a gradually increasing number) who explicitly disavow social media and refuse to have anything to do with it. (For the record, I'm one of them.)

I promise not to dwell exclusively in this interview on the arguably negative aspects of these technologies, Aaron; but I expect you'll know about the open public statement by one of Facebook's founders, Sean Parker, that Facebook was deliberately designed by behavioural scientists to be as addictive as possible (House, 2019b). I'm wondering what your perspective is on this aspect of these technologies from a depth-psychology viewpoint, and how you make sense of the ethical issues raised by the mass manipulation of subjectivity through the arguably toxic cocktail of the human need for affirmation and recognition, met by the deployment of ICT to enable corporate manipulation on a global scale, with its deep penetration into the personal lives of possibly billions of people?

AB: Something that I did not address in my book, which is regrettable, is the backdrop of capitalism. This wasn't so much of an oversight as a choice about what I wanted to investigate, which was more about individual subjective experience than a more global approach. As an individual I am so drawn to subjectivity and individual phenomenology (I am a psychotherapist, after all) that I sometimes neglect the wider contextual issues. I am also aware that my expertise lies in the former rather than the latter; even though I consider myself a cultural theorist, my point of reference is the individual.

Having said that, we cannot approach the individual outside of their context, and having missed being explicit about that context in the book was an oversight. I think it is crucially important to understand how and why things developed the way they did in order to put them in perspective. For example, it is crucial to understand that the phenomenon of social media was born out of the basic human motivation to relate within a context of profit-driven capitalism. It's a big subject to explore in more depth at another time, but capitalism itself is

also a representation of human motivations, so where social media and capitalism intersect actually tells us a lot about ourselves. While Facebook may be motivated by profit, our engagement across it is motivated by our own *digital economy of recognition*. The accumulation of validation through 'likes', 'follows' etc. is a powerful motivating force.

I think the development of social media in relation to capitalism is often misunderstood as some kind of other nefarious puppet mastery – for example, Mark Zuckerberg pushing a secret agenda of the right or the left (depending on what source you're reading). I don't think this is the case. However, the profit motive is corrupting. This lacuna in my own research became blatantly apparent during the Brexit and Trump campaigns, which were both the results of manipulation of social media by nefarious sources[1] –but I don't believe these sources were Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey (of Twitter). However, those profit motives did enable them to turn a blind eye and reap the benefits of the income that unethical advertising and the spread of fake news brought them.

The degree to which we are enabled to exist in filter bubbles today is very worrying, as we now have different communities who also live in different 'truth bubbles', that is very damaging to society. I am not a relativist, and I do believe in the objective truth of a variety of propositions (the truth of climate change, for example, or that coronavirus is not a result of 5G technology). The fact that large sections of the population are being manipulated into believing myths is terrifying. The fact that their personal connections are the means by which these mistruths are spread is even more worrying.

This important contextual piece was missing from my early writings for reasons I've already mentioned, but also, I think, because it was less evident back in 2012 when I was writing. Sure, we were concerned about being manipulated – but this was generally to do with advertising. Nowadays I feel more confident that *there are nefarious characters and organisations* involved in the manipulation of 'truth' for a variety of purposes, and who are using social media to great effect in disseminating these purposeful mistruths. And while I am no doubt convinced that depth psychology has a lot to offer about our *understanding* of this phenomena, it is not likely to be the solution. That, I think, will have to be more practical, and come in the form of public pushback, regulation and stronger government in the face of tech companies that are becoming omnipotent global forces.

RH: How extraordinary, Aaron… – literally as I write, an email has just dropped into my inbox from a friend with a link to a report on Donald Trump's new executive order on the social media companies, with BBC News reporting, 'US President Donald Trump will sign an executive order targeting social media firms, the White House has said'; and another report saying, 'Trump threatens to shut down social media companies' (respectively, BBC News, 2020; Cellan-Jones, 2020). This is clearly a rapidly unfolding story that will run and run. Certainly, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and the way voter intentions in both the EU referendum and the 2016 US presidential election were manipulated via social media, surely raise far-reaching questions about the fragility of democracy and a free society (e.g. Cadwalladr & Townsend, 2018; *Guardian*, various dates). But perhaps that's for another interview!

Thanks for that brilliant answer, Aaron – and I really appreciate your openness in admitting where your 2013 book might have lacunae. It's such a refreshing pleasure not to encounter the usual ass-covering professional defensiveness! – thank you. And there's much to engage with in your rich response.[2] As you presciently put it, 'where social media and capitalism intersect actually tells us a lot about ourselves' – and the phrase 'our own *digital economy of recognition*' is a very powerful and telling one. I suppose I'd like to ask you whether you have any concerns about Information & Communication and 'smart' technologies (and AI and super-AI)

compromising our very humanity, as commentators like Harari (2018, Part 1), Perlas (2018), Schneider (2019) and Naydler (2020) certainly do? I ask this because these are all very considerable commentators on our cultural and spiritual condition, and in this sense these technologies, and their evolving place in hypermodern human culture, surely can't be left out of these momentous conversations about the very future of humanity – touching as they do on the deepest questions about the human–technology relationship and its existential implications. And if I'm getting overly grandiose and apocalyptic, I'm sure you'll tell me!

AB: First, I do feel duty-bound to respond to your footnote [2], Richard – hopefully briefly enough that we don't open up a whole new thing.[3]

Before we talk about 'compromising our humanity' we have to understand indeed what our humanity is. I can't be entirely sure I have the answer for that question, or whether 'our humanity' is a single or stable thing that is not totally imbued in time and culture anyway. We might struggle to identify with our humanity in our ancestors, whether they be raping and pillaging hoards, genocidal nation-states, or 'good Christians' deploying The Inquisition or putting witches on trial; or indeed the inhumanity we see all around us today – committed by humans. We are stuck in a human paradigm with each other and our technologies. After all, it took less than 24 hours for Twitter's naive AI 'bot' to become a racist (Vincent, 2016), which is hardly a surprise when you understand that AI is simply a learning algorithm, and just a smattering of highly influential tweets from the very President of the United States would push it in that direction. I think that perhaps the point of your question is more about a *humanity that is recognisable to us*, and to that I might say that it is likely we are moving in a direction in which it becomes less recognisable, faster.

Usually when I'm speaking to groups on this subject I jokingly refer to what I call 'the Laura Ingalls Wilder effect'. If you aren't familiar with her, she is the author of *The Little House on the Prairie*, which was based on her childhood. I have joked that if Laura Ingalls Wilder walked into a Sainsbury's it would blow her head off. 'Why are there tomatoes here in February? Why is the meat wrapped in plastic? What is a refrigerator?' The whole concept of a supermarket for a woman of her generation is unthinkable. Yet we read *Brave New World* and find it, frankly, familiar. This is the nature of generational change. Does buying produce out of season make us un-human? Some may argue so, but others see it as an advance. Only 20 years ago 'internet dating' was a fringe concern only to those deemed to be desperately lonely. Today operating a Tinder account is hardly controversial – and this is an app where people can accept or dismiss a potential partner with the swipe of a finger left or right? Dehumanising, or a manifestation of the parts of being human we don't like very much?

I am neither utopian nor dystopian about what will happen in the future of tech, though I'm pretty sure that humanity will change beyond recognition faster than we are used to – not in generations but half-decades, if not even less than this. This will make a lot of people nervous. And like anything else, some of these changes will be good, and some perhaps not so much. It is very likely that the marriage of AI and Big Data could reap fantastic rewards. Already in many cases you would wish to have an AI making some medical diagnoses rather than a medical doctor. That might feel weird, and it will probably put many doctors' noses out of joint (though mechanical plastic surgeons will probably do it better) – but quite simply, the AI may just do it better. That doesn't mean we won't still need some bedside manner. However, even bedside manner can be up for grabs.

We are currently in a social-care crisis (Covid-19 notwithstanding) with a population that is growing older and not enough people to look

after them. Responsive robotic pets (Anon, 2010), however, have already been shown to calm people with dementia. While it would be ideal to have human companions, that is often not possible, and begs the question as to whether such a solution is better than leaving the elderly under-staffed and under-stimulated. Of course this brings us back to our question of capitalism, and that when a cheaper solution does the trick, the replacing of a human carer with a robotic seal, it is plainly unethical and distressing. However, it could also be a pragmatic solution in contexts where the facts on the ground are simply not ideal, and something is better than nothing. This is not me making an argument for robotic companions, but we should be open minded to where robots and AI can bring added value to our lives – even if this means changing what we think 'humanity' is.

I think one of the main problems at the moment is that developers with the most resources are moving at lightning speed with this kind of progress – not charitable trusts. It's no accident that it was the American military research unit DARPA that created the first fully automated psychological counsellor (SimSensei & MultiSense, 2013) to treat PTSD in traumatised soldiers. There are a thousand ethical questions raised here about the entire Military Industrial Complex, and how terrifically unjust wars and military interventions may be maintained more easily by cheaply and effectively treating the trauma of the young soldiers that we routinely send into conflict zones. These are important conversations that must happen, and should be the subject of oversight by ethicists, regulators – and yes, psychotherapists! However, the subject-matter is so uncanny and frightening that most of the people who should probably be engaging with it simply want it not to happen and to shut it down. While the deployment of such technologies can result in frighteningly awful things (like the atom bomb), it can also be utilised for good (medical imaging). As technological development reflects 'humanity' you are likely to see both things happening. And in the current world, the monied agencies are private companies and nation-states who generally invest in their military and not, say, in their hospitals.

So this is rather a long way of saying, yes, it will compromise our humanity – but our humanity is always being compromised: it was never in a natural state from which it became something different. Indeed, it may come to us wiping ourselves out, as we nearly did with atomic energy and might still do with industrialisation; or it may indeed save us, by finding ways to use the Earth's resources better so we don't all perish because of climate change. Who knows, it may even enable us to live together more congenially as a species on the planet. Like I said earlier, I'm neither utopian nor dystopian about it – though at the time of writing, in the middle of the Covid-19 crises and horrific racial injustice tearing apart my country of birth, I can't say I'm feeling optimistic.

Having said that, I don't want to finish on a pessimistic note. So I would like to finish this answer by suggesting that this is where we, as professionals in human relating, should be *more* rather than *less* involved. The reaction across the profession, as I see it, is one of fear, repulsion, dread, apathy, or putting our heads in the sand. We tend to see technology as something that is outside of humanity, and as individuals who care for humanity, outside our purview. It *should* be in our purview! We should be involved with that regulation, on the ethics boards, working with developers as much as possible to ensure that technological development doesn't lose touch with the values that we hold dear. We should do this critically, of course, but also with an open mind, holding fast to the idea that technology can be harnessed for good – and we should be part of that conversation. Part of that conversation may very well be preserving areas outside it, setting boundaries, and monitoring its use. But there is also a part of that conversation that creatively sees what we can offer to its further development – so that whatever humanity we do

become, we still want it to feel like it's one we can live with.

RH: Just a sentence or two in response to your welcome footnote, Aaron: I strongly align myself with philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend's radical view that there's actually *no such as science* – akin, perhaps, to Winnicott's paradoxical 'There's no such thing as a baby'; and so for me, the same applies *ipso facto* to the notion of 'scientific *method*'. But there will be an in-depth interview with a Feyerabend philosopher-scholar in the journal before too long, where we'll really be able to go into these controversial (and contestable) epistemological questions.

I really like how you end your previous answer – as you strongly push back against the idea (that can all too easily hold away) that we are essentially the hapless victims of the technological future, rather than being able to be the proactive and informed creators of that future. Amen to that! I also wholeheartedly agree with you about ethics – as you write, 'These conversations… should be the subject of oversight by ethicists… We should be involved… on the ethics boards… to ensure that technological development doesn't lose touch… with the values that we hold dear'. At the risk of over-pushing Feyerabend, he was emphatic that *ethics are primary*, and should thus be a key measure of scientific 'truth' (Munévar, 2000) – as Feyerabend has it, 'ethics, having once been a secret measure of scientific truth, can now become its overt judge' (quoted in ibid.).

Re '…in many cases you would wish to have an AI making some medical diagnoses than you would a medical doctor': I guess that raises deep questions about mainstream medicine and its nature. I have big 'issues' with mainstream allopathic-materialist medicine, and am much more drawn to explicitly holistic medical paradigms like anthroposophical and Ayurvedic medicine (e.g. Evans & Rodger, 2017). So I guess one pays one's paradigmatic penny and makes one's choice on the place of technology (AI) in these realms.

Re '…While it would be ideal to have human companions, that often is not possible… we should be open minded to where robots and AI can bring added value to our lives'. As well as spiritual questions, I guess this also raises questions about the *political-economic* context of technology, and whether politically partisan cost considerations will be allowed to prevail as *the* decisive factor when it comes to making such human-relational decisions. Again, we can only hope that ethics play a key part in such decisions and societal preferences, rather than technology winning out 'just because it *can* "deliver the service"'.

Aaron, I realise I've been unduly negative about technology in this interview, so let me try to balance it out a bit by giving you the last word on what you see as the main hopes and benefits that we can derive from social-networking technologies. And finally, can we expect to see a 2nd edition of your *Psychodynamics of Social Networking* on the bookshelves at some point? I for one would greatly welcome that. Thanks for a great interview – and let's leave the last words with you.

AB: First, and only very shortly, I would not exclude other forms of medicine into ways in which AI and Big Data may be helpful. I am not at all doubtful about the potential curative benefits of acupuncture, herbalism, Ayurvedic, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), or any variety of non-Western solutions. (When I was 18 I went to China and studied TCM over the summer before university – I had initially intended to be a medical doctor and wanted to incorporate traditional medicine into that). But I would be more satisfied to see at least some evidence of efficacy, and these methodologies shouldn't be immune to such investigations.

When we are talking about funding, and particularly public funding, I think we need to have some measure of evidence base, without making 'evidence base' some kind of god-like dogma. I'm sure this will raise some hackles, but for me, homeopathy, for instance, is nothing but a myth – though possibly a very effective

placebo; and that it is supported by the NHS is, I think, problematic.

Having thrown homeopathy under the bus, I would also volunteer that something very dear to my own heart – psychotherapy – may also benefit heavily from a placebo effect: in fact the very same one – focussed human attention (the difference being that the healing property for homeopathy is attributed to a sugar pill). I think this is the human factor that materialistic science alone may never be able to uncover and that is – phenomenologically, anyway – vital to human meaning. I am not a religions man, but if religion brings succour to people because they are human beings, I see no reason why AI or Big Data should get in the way of that either. It's where mythology supersedes rationality (the teaching of creationism in schools, for example, or such deep lack of public understanding of the natural sciences that lead to the anti-vaccination movement) that I get concerned. But I fear this is another long interview that could emerge from this that we should save for another time!

On your second concern, I cannot disagree. I think political and economic factors are the driving-force behind much technological innovation, including comforting robots in care homes. I think we should be entirely vigilant that we do not go down a road of creating cheap alternatives that will most likely be deployed on underprivileged peoples while quality human care would be reserved for those who could afford it. I am an optimist, but also a realist; and capitalist motivation behind innovation is the greatest challenge. What I am saying is that if it were possible to get our motives right, putting ethics and the public and worldly good first, we can do amazing things with technology, AI and Big Data. As Melvin Kranzberg said in his 'Laws of Technology', 'technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral' – and it is we human beings who need to steer, as much as possible, that non-neutrality. How much control we have over its momentum I cannot say.

Lastly, a revision of *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking* is definitely on the table, but it's going to be a while. Fortunately, while many factors have changed, the basic premise of my application of relational theory to social media remains, so I think (he says narcissistically) it remains an important text. I have a couple of other half-written books on the go, but I have been commissioned to write an edited collection tentatively called *The Digital Self* which I will start working on, which I hope will be reflective of many of these thoughts, and finding a variety of authors to contribute points of view that will draw a comprehensive picture. The work continues!

Thank you very much for this interview, which was a really interesting opportunity to engage in this material with you. You have made me think very hard about these issues again.

Notes

1 Re the Trump and Brexit campaigns, I cover this issue in the lecture 'The Unconscious of Social Media', Berlin, 20 May, 2019; available at https://tinyurl.com/y9tz2ld4 (accessed 1 June 2020).

2 In passing and appropriately relegated to a footnote, I [RH] just wanted to say that your point about 'objective truth' and fake news is one that is difficult for me. Unlike you, I do verge towards a kind of Feyerabendian relativism (e.g. Preston, 1997, Chapter 10), and to seeing empirical 'science' as just one (limited) cultural story amongst many cultural stories. I also see the deploying of the 'conspiracy theory' card (as I call it) as so often being a silencing manoeuvre by the establishment who support the Kuhnian 'normal science' of the paradigmatic status quo (Kuhn, 1962), and who therefore want to close down thinking about anything that might challenge the prevailing mainstream paradigm. Also, as history repeatedly shows, sometimes there *are* conspiracies! – so it's always an empirical question as to whether a conspiracy exists or not. That's not to say that there's no such thing as 'fake news', nor that for some people, seeing conspiracies everywhere is more about their own low-trust paranoia and (dare I use the term) 'psychopathology', than it is an accurate commentary on the state of the world (though in

another, Laingian sense, perhaps it is the latter, too!).

Phew, how complicated it all is! But there are certainly big questions here, Aaron – and which the late Paul Feyerabend provocatively raised (Feyerabend, 1978) – about how a free society can obtain when mainstream science (including technology) has such a monological hold on claims to human knowledge and truth.

3 I [AB] wouldn't deny that science is not immune from being imbued with values or that its findings are immune to corruption by conscious or unconscious social values (e.g. scientific justification for racism or eugenics). Nor would I deny that science alone is not a paradigm that can be used to understand everything about being human (i.e. a PET scan can never explain or describe actual human experience); that's why I'm a psychotherapist! However, I do believe that the scientific method is exceptional and does provide a different kind of space to access truth. For example, Pasteur demonstrated that it is *true* that there are germs and that they can pass on disease, and Salk was able to use this knowledge to produce a vaccine for polio; and that the eradication of Smallpox happened and was an incredible advance for humanity. The 'story' of antivaxers in its narrative of the dubious reception of 'science' is, I think, a major step backwards, and qualifying the scientific method as a knowledge like any other, I believe, is quite dangerous.

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About the contributors

Aaron Balick Ph.D. is a psychotherapist, cultural theorist and author applying ideas from depth psychology to culture and technology. He is an honorary senior lecturer at the Department for Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex (UK). His books include *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking: Connected-up Instantaneous Culture and the Self*, the children's book *Keep Your Cool: How to Deal with Life's Worries and Stress*, and *The Little Book of Calm: Tame Your Anxieties, Face your Fears, and Live Free.* Aaron is the director of Stillpoint Spaces, an international hub for exploring depth psychology.

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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives."

Albert Einstein (1879–1955)