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Facebook's Quality Initiatives: The Ideological Staging of Public Sphere Communication

**A guest lecture by Lincoln Dahlberg
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Since the 2016 US presidential election, Facebook has announced and implemented an impressive array of what I refer to as “quality initiatives” in response to extensive allegations and evidence that it hosts and amplifies a significant amount of content and interaction that is harmful to democratic communication. However, these initiatives do not *seem* to respond to the political economy critique that there is a negative relationship between Facebook’s profit-driven, targeted-advertising business model and public sphere communication. In this paper I demonstrate, through a discourse theory–informed examination of Facebook’s own descriptions of its quality initiatives, how the initiatives *do* in fact strongly respond to this critique. However, they do not do so by altering Facebook’s political economy. As my examination shows, the initiatives respond *ideologically* to the political economy critique. They do this by staging compatibility between Facebook’s business model and public sphere communication, thus obscuring the political economy problem and blocking public consideration of regulatory responses that might inhibit the platform’s profit, growth, and market valuation. In conclusion, I point past the targeted-advertising model to the drive for profit and growth as the core factor behind Facebook’s negative relationship with the public sphere. Hence, I identify the democratization of digital social media intermediaries as necessary for the realization of high quality public sphere communication through such media.

Lincoln is currently working as an independent scholar. He has previously worked as a researcher and lecturer at Massey University, The University of Queensland, and Victoria University of Wellington. His work focuses on the critical analysis of digital communication systems with respect to radical democratic imaginaries. His publications can be found at <https://independent.academia.edu/LincolnDahlberg>