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Facebook's Commodification of Extreme Speech in the Genocide Against the Rohingya

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Social Media Activism in Digital Capitalism

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Facebook's Commodification of Extreme Speech in the Genocide Against the Rohingya

Introduction

Following Donald Trump's inauguration, Mark Zuckerberg decided to discontinue professional fact-checking on Meta platforms, replacing it with so-called Community Notes (McMahon, Kleinman, and Subramanian 2025; Metzger 2025). The network expert Konstantin von Notz commented on this decision, stating: "Zuckerberg is following in Musk's footsteps, prioritizing economic interests over the protection of individuals from insults, threats, and incitement to hatred" (ZDF 2025b). While some interpret Zuckerberg's decision as a capitulation to Trump by eliminating fact-checking in favor of free speech, he—much like Elon Musk—is primarily guided by opportunistic calculations: avoiding state regulation to reduce operational costs (ZDF 2025a). However, Facebook's systematic prioritization of commercial interests over principles of ethical responsibility is by no means a new development.

Within the broader context of social media, this paper examines the relationship between the concept of "Extreme Speech" as defined by Sahana Udupa and Matti Pohjonen and Jodi Dean's notion of "Communicative Capitalism." This analysis is conducted through the case study of Facebook's role in the genocide against the Rohingya in Myanmar. After defining key terms and providing a brief overview of the socio-political situation, the paper situates Facebook's role within the framework of ethno-nationalist propaganda and organized violence in Myanmar, analyzing it through the lens of "Extreme Speech" and "Communicative Capitalism."

What is Extreme Speech?

Udupa and Pohjonen define "Extreme Speech" as a methodological concept that differentiates cultural and normative variations of hate speech based on political-economic and historical contexts. They do so by examining the boundaries of legitimate language along axes such as truth-falsehood and politeness-impoliteness (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019). Their inquiry focuses on (1) the processes through which hate-driven language is normalized or legitimized and (2) the ways in which language is weaponized for authority and control (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3052).

The concept of Extreme Speech offers a critical perspective that incorporates local cultural meanings and practices, challenging the universal applicability of Western definitions of hate speech (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3050). A context-independent definition of hate speech proves problematic, as it fails to recognize, for instance, the strategic recoding of cultural values into extremist narratives within mainstream discourse (e.g., "White Genocide") or the role of memes and humorous formats as amplification mechanisms (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3058). While the

concept of hate speech is limited to a binary distinction between acceptable and unacceptable speech, as well as the relationship between freedom of expression and inflicted harm, Extreme Speech allows for the identification of a spectrum of practices (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3049).

Udupa and Pohjonen also emphasize the socio-technological aspects of new media, arguing that digital platforms provide a structural context for Extreme Speech (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3052). These platforms facilitate Extreme Speech by algorithmically amplifying polarization and conflict, promoting content through self-publicity, affect, and entertainment, and circulating it for commercial purposes (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3058).

Finally, violence in the form of Extreme Speech serves as an identity-forming practice, contributing to political subjectivity in response to identity crises induced by globalization and the resulting social and geopolitical uncertainties (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3062). The ambivalence of Extreme Speech remains difficult to assess, as it can be both progressive and destructive.

What is Communicative Capitalism?

Jodi Dean describes Communicative Capitalism as the commercialization of political communication through social media, which primarily serves entertainment purposes while simultaneously creating the illusion of political participation (Dean 2009). Political content circulates within digital platforms but remains decoupled from real political decision-making processes (Dean 2009, 22). The market appears to be a space of democratic aspirations, yet it fails to produce tangible political outcomes (Dean 2009, 23). With the increasing interconnectedness and expansion of communicative processes, practices, experiences, and emotions are transformed into a consumption- and finance-driven entertainment economy and subsequently monetized (Dean 2009, 24). This dynamic particularly benefits right-wing ideologies, as algorithmic mechanisms amplify their dissemination and stabilize them through ad-based financing models (Dean 2009, 33 ff.).

Communicative Capitalism entails a fetishization of technological infrastructures, which are publicly perceived as drivers of democratization (Dean 2009, 33, 47). However, the rhetoric of equal access and comprehensive participation conceals structural power imbalances (*ibid.*). While the vast amount of digital content is interpreted as an expression of democratic diversity, the actual dynamics of social media lead to a gradual erosion of political agency (Dean 2009, 34 ff.). Instead of genuine participation, a façade of engagement emerges, while influence, capital, and political control become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few actors (*ibid.*).

Dean argues that within Communicative Capitalism, the value of a message is determined less by its substantive content than by its circulation (Dean 2009, 27). Exchange value outweighs use value, meaning that the success of a post is measured by factors such as popularity, reach, and engagement time (*ibid.*). This results in a

distortion of political communication, characterized by three psychopolitical mechanisms: (a) Condensation, where political complexity is reduced to seemingly simple technological solutions; (b) Displacement, which shifts political processes into everyday life and renders experts irrelevant; and (c) Denial, through which Communicative Capitalism fetishistically negates the structural deficiencies of democratic systems, thereby obscuring their failures (Dean 2009, 38–42).

The Genocide Against the Rohingya in Myanmar

Ethno-nationalist Propaganda & Organized Crimes

Myanmar is culturally and linguistically diverse, yet its population experiences unequal political rights. While the Bamar-Buddhists hold a two-thirds majority, ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, face marginalization and stigmatization (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 408). Since independence in 1948 and throughout the democratization phases, the Rohingya have suffered from intensified persecution and growing polarization (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 409). One key factor in this societal divide is Myanmar's Citizenship Law of October 15, 1982, which classified citizens as a "national race" while labeling minorities such as the Rohingya as illegal migrants ("Bengalis") (Tähtinen 2024, 5–6).

Particularly, the Tatmadaw military and Buddhist nationalists weaponized social media platforms like Facebook to orchestrate conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims, suppress dissent, and disseminate targeted disinformation, incitement, and hate speech against the Rohingya, leading to severe human rights violations (Sablosky 2021, 1018 ff.; Yue 2020, 816). With thousands of posts drawing clear parallels to Nazi Germany, public opinion was manipulated, and the population was incited to violence (Yue 2020, 833; Maldar and Seyedzadeh Sani 2023, 279).

The conflict escalated in 2017 when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked a government outpost, prompting Burmese security forces to respond with disproportionate violence against the entire Rohingya population in northern Rakhine State (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 409; Deejay et al. 2024, 1313). This military crackdown by the Tatmadaw was labeled as "clearance operations." By 2018, approximately 800,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh (Yue 2020, 833; Deejay et al. 2024, 1313). An international investigation classified these events as genocide and crimes against humanity under international law (Yue 2020, 816).

Facebook's Digital Infrastructure as a Contributor to the Crime

For a long time, the internet was unfamiliar to the people of Myanmar, as they were digitally isolated from the outside world. Parallel to the democratization process and economic liberalization, the country's telecommunications sector rapidly expanded between 2010 and 2018 (Sablosky 2021, 1023 ff.). Investments by

international corporations led to a sudden 4G coverage rate of 97% of the population, with mobile phone penetration exceeding 100% (Sablosky 2021, 1025).

As part of the so-called Facebook Zero Initiative, Mark Zuckerberg ostensibly pursued philanthropic intentions to provide development aid in the Global South. Starting in 2013, the initiative “Free Basics” (formerly “Internet.org”) offered a pre-installed platform on smartphones, granting users free data access to a limited number of basic services, including Facebook (Deejay et al. 2024, 1315; Tantacrul 2024; Tähtinen 2024, 6). Since most users refrained from using other paid services beyond the platform, Facebook effectively became synonymous with the internet in Myanmar (Tähtinen 2024, 2). The number of Facebook users surged from 2 million in 2014 to 30 million in 2017 (Singh 2018). Between 2011 and 2018, an average of 95% of the population used Facebook as their sole social media platform (Tähtinen 2024, 6).

Although Facebook promoted humanitarian and democratic values under the guise of fostering global connectivity and bridging the digital divide between the Global South and industrialized nations, the company acted solely out of expansionist motives. It failed to consider the political and cultural context or implement preventive measures to curb extreme speech before launching its services (Deejay et al. 2024, 1316–18). Facebook has been accused of violating net neutrality and engaging in digital colonialism in the Global South by prioritizing Western services and content with greater visibility while simultaneously collecting user data (Global Voices Advox 2017; Deejay et al. 2024, 1316).

Within academic discourse, the question remains unresolved as to what extent Facebook should bear responsibility for the organized crimes committed in Myanmar, given that military violence against Muslims had already occurred prior to the platform’s introduction (Samet, Arriola, and Matanock 2024, 958–59). Western literature presents two perspectives: on the one hand, Facebook is held accountable for facilitating violence; on the other hand, scholars argue that social media platforms like Facebook have the potential to foster democratic participation through access to diverse perspectives (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 421) or even promote cultural tolerance (Samet, Arriola, and Matanock 2024, 959).

However, the intensity of radicalization and subsequent willingness to commit violence among users depends on the social environment in which social media is introduced. While the availability of social media had an overall negative impact on the events in Myanmar, the conflict escalated most in regions already experiencing heightened tensions between ethnic groups (Tähtinen 2024, 1). Regarding the intensification of anti-Muslim hate campaigns and the increase in attacks on minorities from 2012 onward, Tähtinen, building on the works of Adena et al. and Bursztyn et al., confirms the effectiveness of inciteful mobilization, emphasizing that recipients’ predispositions—such as prejudice and intolerance—are decisive factors (see Tähtinen 2024, 20; Adena et al. 2015; Bursztyn et al. 2019).

Nevertheless, Facebook adopted a defensive stance, rejecting ethical responsibility by promoting techno-optimistic narratives that scapegoated Myanmar

itself (Deejay et al. 2024, 1319–20). These narratives align with a Silicon Valley mindset, framing the Myanmar government's lack of digital literacy and the population's inability to responsibly engage with social media as failures to meet the purported promises of new technologies (Deejay et al. 2024, ebd.). This highlights the epistemic power imbalance between the dominant Western knowledge system and the marginalized consciousness of invisibilized individuals in the Global South, who often struggle to resist techno-optimistic narratives (Deejay et al. 2024, 1317; see also Santos 2015).

Facebook's Promotion of Extreme Speech

The methodological concept of Extreme Speech not only enables the description but also a nuanced analysis of incitement and hate speech on Facebook in the context of the genocide against the Rohingya. However, the research questions formulated by Udupa and Pohjonen can only be addressed superficially within this essay.

The first question—what processes lead to the normalization or legitimization of hate-driven language?—can be answered through several factors. On the one hand, military actors in particular disseminated state propaganda, disinformation, and hate campaigns to stigmatize and mobilize against the Rohingya ethnic group, portraying them as "illegal migrants," Islamist extremists, or an economic threat (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 409). Extremist figures such as Wirathu deliberately used Facebook for hate campaigns, with hundreds of posts being published per hour (Sablosky 2021, 1029). Many armed groups mimicked state functions on social media, presenting themselves as competent and legitimate state actors (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 200). They employed official state symbols, displayed supposed government structures and public services, and used parades to rally support (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 221). These strategies aimed to generate authenticity and credibility, reinforcing the legitimacy of these actors in the eyes of users (*ibid.*). Symbolic elements such as flags, anthems, and administrative structures played a crucial role in this process (*ibid.*). In this context, the smartphone became a central tool for leadership, control, reconnaissance, and coordination of actions (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 202).

On the other hand, Facebook's recommendation algorithms amplified the spread of extremist content (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 412–13). Polarizing posts, due to their high engagement rates, gained greater reach and contributed to the reinforcement of prejudices within so-called echo chambers (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 410–12). This algorithmically promoted affective and attitudinal polarization made users more susceptible to disinformation, reinforced cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, and increased willingness to commit violence against the Rohingya (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 417 ff.).

Another key factor was Facebook's lack of adequate content moderation. While the company responded to international criticism during the restrictive phase (2017–2021) by removing hate speech and suspending accounts linked to nationalist actors

and the Tatmadaw, the unequal treatment of different actors distorted the conflict dynamics (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 204). While certain groups continued to receive increased visibility and reach, counter-narratives and opposing voices were marginalized (Sablosky 2021, 1021; Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 221 ff.).

The second question—how was language used as an instrument for enforcing authority and control?—partially overlaps with the first, as linguistic strategies served to legitimize acts of violence against the Rohingya. By spreading falsehoods and conspiracy theories, the Muslim minority was dehumanized and portrayed as a threat to Buddhism (Yue 2020, 820). This propagandistic rhetoric provided the ideological foundation for justifying violence (*ibid.*). Facebook functioned as a catalyst by facilitating the rapid dissemination of disinformation and intensifying polarization (*ibid.*). This confirms Udupa and Pohjonen’s assertion that social media platforms such as Facebook create a structural foundation for Extreme Speech (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3052).

Facebook’s influence on the population of Myanmar highlights the problematic nature of uncritically applying Western concepts such as hate speech to Global South contexts. Such an approach overlooks cultural, social, and political nuances. The concept of Extreme Speech proves analytically valuable in this context, as it encompasses not only linguistic but also audiovisual elements. For example, images of killed opponents were disseminated as warnings to potential traitors (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 216). Furthermore, Udupa and Pohjonen emphasize that Extreme Speech serves an identity-forming function (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019, 3053). This is particularly evident in the mobilization of nationalist Buddhists, who defined their identity in opposition to the Rohingya through the use of Extreme Speech.

Facebook’s Actions in Accordance with the Principles of Communicative Capitalism

Facebook operates according to the principles of communicative capitalism. The company’s market orientation leads, on the one hand, to the monetization of communication by commodifying hate speech and, on the other, to structural irresponsibility regarding the social consequences of radicalization processes. This dynamic reflects a prioritization of economic expansion while simultaneously neglecting pluralistic governance and social integration (Sablosky 2021, 1026).

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how Facebook’s market-driven logic has influenced the democratization process in Myanmar and whether it has provided the population with an illusion of political participation—particularly concerning the dissemination of incitement and hate speech. As Myanmar’s dominant news source, Facebook granted access to uncensored information, opinions, and perspectives not covered by traditional media (Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 420). This applied both to voices from minority regions and to those of the Buddhist majority society (*ibid.*). However, while media participation remained largely detached from real political decision-making, strategically deployed incitement was

instrumentalized to mobilize violence—a form of political influence that did not align with democratic or parliamentary processes. Rather than acting as a neutral platform for political participation, Facebook ultimately had a destabilizing effect, undermining pluralistic governance structures by amplifying Tatmadaw propaganda and systematically reducing the visibility of ethnic minorities (Sablosky 2021, 1021).

Although Facebook cannot be considered the sole driver of religious intolerance in Myanmar—given the country’s generally high levels of religious discrimination, independent of social media (Samet, Arriola, and Matanock 2024, 959)—the platform fundamentally altered communication dynamics. The increasing speed, immediacy, and interactivity of digital communication significantly contributed to the escalation of social tensions (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 201; Maldar and Seyedzadeh Sani 2023, 281).

Facebook distorted political communication through three central psychopolitical mechanisms: (a) **Condensation:** Facebook’s platform design, combined with users’ short attention spans, favors the dissemination of emotionalized and often highly simplified political content. The aim of these mechanisms is to maximize engagement through affective triggering (see Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020, 412). In doing so, Facebook not only reduces the substantive complexity of political debates but also shapes the form of discourse by having recommendation algorithms suggest simplistic technological solutions.

(b) **Displacement:** Political processes are increasingly integrated into everyday life, while the communicative market expands unchecked into all social spheres. In this context, Facebook exercises a disciplining form of power by possessing more extensive data on Myanmar’s population than national institutions (Tønnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung 2022, 204). In a way, Facebook acts as a quasi-state actor, exerting global power, national sovereignty, and political authority to regulate political speech according to its own socioeconomic interests—whether consciously or unconsciously. This is particularly evident in the platform’s selective decisions on which actors to classify as extremists (Sablosky 2021, 1034).

(c) **Denial:** Facebook not only negates democratic deficits but also disclaims any responsibility for their consequences. From the perspective of corporate complicity, Facebook could be held legally accountable, as the platform’s deliberate use by authoritarian regimes to incite violent crimes could fall under corporate criminal liability (Yue 2020, 824 ff.). However, international legal frameworks are often non-binding, functioning more as normative guidelines than as enforceable regulations (Yue 2020, 816). As a result, Facebook operates in a largely lawless space without state oversight (Sablosky 2021, 1022). Since international criminal courts focus on prosecuting individual actors, corporate criminal liability at the international level remains unfeasible (Maldar and Seyedzadeh Sani 2023, 282). While national courts could hold corporations accountable (*ibid.*), this has not yet occurred in Myanmar.

Mark Zuckerberg publicly admitted that Facebook contributed to the spread of hate speech, harassment, and disinformation (Roose and Mozur 2018). Nevertheless,

despite international criticism and reputational damage, the company continues its expansion into markets with high abuse potential (Yue 2020, 842; Nourooz Pour 2023, 108).

Facebook's indifference toward the spread of disinformation and hate speech is particularly evident in its slow response to repeated warnings between 2012 and 2015 (Yue 2020, 843). In the category of **ante-factum failures**, Facebook's potential liability includes the deliberate omission of effective measures against hate speech despite being aware of escalating tensions. This includes, in particular, the failure to allocate sufficient resources for adequate content moderation (Nourooz Pour 2023, 111). As Gillespie points out, moderation is an essential component of any platform (Gillespie 2018, 207). At the onset of the crisis, however, only a single individual was responsible for Burmese-language moderation (Sablosky 2021, 1033). Other languages were processed using inadequate translation tools, leading to either unrecognized or distorted hate speech (Sablosky 2021, 1032). A striking example of these moderation shortcomings is the erroneous translation of "Kill all the Kalars that you see in Myanmar; none of them should be left alive" into "I shouldn't have a rainbow in Myanmar" (Sablosky 2021, 1032).

Even existing moderation mechanisms proved insufficient, as they failed to account for cultural sensitivities and did not differentiate particular contexts. This led to systemic errors in handling hate speech and disinformation. Another example of Facebook's lack of understanding of Myanmar's cultural complexity was its decision to establish Burmese as the sole default language on the platform (Sablosky 2021, 1033). This aligned with the Tatmadaw's longstanding policy of marginalizing indigenous languages (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Facebook's removal of the term "Kalar" — an ethnic slur against the Rohingya, but also a neutral word in other contexts — resulted in the elimination of everyday vocabulary (Sablosky 2021, 1033).

In the category of **post-factum failures**, Facebook has failed to support key transitional justice processes (Nourooz Pour 2023, 105 ff.). This includes providing relevant data on hate speech and violent crimes, supporting victims and affected communities, and adapting internal policies to prevent future offenses (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

In an unregulated market, Facebook has formed a dangerous symbiosis with the Myanmar government and certain military actors, characterized by a significant power imbalance. On the one hand, Facebook, as a critical communication infrastructure, pursues an expansionist agenda by entering new markets and fostering dependencies. This occurs through violations of net neutrality and the establishment of a near-monopolistic market position. On the other hand, the Myanmar government utilizes Facebook as an effective and efficient tool to propagate its ethno-nationalist agenda, particularly by mobilizing the Buddhist majority against Muslim minorities.

In the context of digital colonialism, Myanmar exhibits a dual dependency on Facebook, which stems from the global economic disparity between the Global North and South. First, the state lacks the legal means to challenge the platform's data-extractive and polarization-driven market mechanisms. Second, Myanmar is often portrayed as the sole scapegoat for escalating violence in Western techno-optimistic discourse, while the role of digital infrastructure remains largely unexamined.

The concept of Extreme Speech is closely intertwined with communicative capitalism—both operate like interlocking puzzle pieces. Extreme Speech and communicative capitalism alike normalize and facilitate hate-driven discourse. While Extreme Speech, in the form of disinformation and targeted hate campaigns, is amplified by recommendation algorithms—thereby increasing engagement rates and reinforcing prejudices—communicative capitalism functions as a value-neutral, market-driven system that not only enables but actively commodifies these processes. The market-oriented logic of social platforms ultimately leads to structural irresponsibility, with profit maximization as the primary goal. This is particularly evident in the systematic reduction of resources allocated for adequate content moderation, which further exacerbates the spread of Extreme Speech.

The mechanisms of Extreme Speech align with the three psychopolitical mechanisms of communicative capitalism: (a) Condensation: The structure of Extreme Speech mirrors the operational logic of social platforms by adapting to users' reduced attention spans and amplifying content through emotional polarization. (b) Displacement: Similar to political discourse, Extreme Speech increasingly permeates everyday life, extending its impact beyond the digital sphere. (c) Denial: Due to its gradual normalization, Extreme Speech is not only tolerated but, within a largely lawless space devoid of state regulation, actively denied.

Although Extreme Speech, from a holistic perspective, can be considered a form of political agency—both through participation in social media and the physical violence it incites—it remains largely disconnected from real political decision-making in Myanmar. Nonetheless, it is intrinsically linked to communicative capitalism, as both mechanisms ultimately serve to commodify communication and sustain a profit-driven market system.

Final Remarks

Facebook's persistent market orientation at the expense of social responsibility is evident not only in its role in Myanmar but also in recent developments. The planned discontinuation of professional fact-checking on Meta platforms in favor of Community Notes once again underscores the prioritization of economic interests over the protection of democratic discourse. This decision, mirroring policies enacted by other tech billionaires such as Elon Musk, poses the risk of further normalizing and

amplifying disinformation and Extreme Speech. It also highlights that, despite international criticism and the company's own acknowledgment of past failures, Facebook has implemented few meaningful regulatory measures to address problematic content. Thus, Facebook remains a key actor in communicative capitalism—one that perceives digital communication not as a public infrastructure but as a commodity, with profound social and political consequences.

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