11

BEYOND TECHNO-NARCISSISM: SELF AND OTHER IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC REALM

THE CREATION OF the Internet as a widely available means of communication in the early 1990s and its rapid development in decades since have inspired waves of enthusiasm about the creation of new public spaces, digital domains that many observers believed would expand and enhance citizen participation in political discussions and civic activities. Beyond the impressive transformations that networked communications brought to the world's economic, social, and cultural institutions, it was conceivable that a marvelous revitalization in democratic politics would take shape as people found their way onto the Internet and began using its powers to express their ideas, needs, demands, and practical proposals. While many names were invented for these glorious possibilities—cyberspace, information society, infobahn, network society, and others—by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century a widely shared label was simply "social media." It pointed to the activities of billions of people on prominent digital platforms around the globe—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and others. Thus, it seemed that the wonderful dream of a public realm revitalized by the gift of digital technology might well come true.

Democracy Reborn?

AMONG WRITINGS THAT explored the economic, cultural, and political possibilities of the Internet, perhaps the most systematic and forward-looking is *The Wealth of Networks* by

social scientist and philosopher Yochai Benkler.[1] The book describes a fundamental shift within the information economy of modern society as a whole. Benkler notes that during most of the past 150 years information systems were structured by the "industrial model," in which production was capital intensive, heavily centralized, market oriented, and rooted in notions of private property. A stultifying consequence of this model, he argues, was to limit personal freedom and drastically curtail possibilities for social cooperation as workers entered the marketplace.[2] Often overlooked but always side-by-side with this model was an older, even deeper set of historical practices that relied on a quite different set of human relationships: "Education, arts and sciences, political debate, and theological disputation have always been much more importantly infused with nonmarket motivations and actors than, say, the automobile industry."[3] Given an opportunity to do so, people have often employed methods that rely on individual initiative, social collaboration, sharing, and communal creativity.

What happened in the 1980s and 1990s, Benkler observes, is that the capital requirements of an information economy shifted. "The declining price of computation, communication, and storage [has] . . . placed the material means of information and cultural production in the hands of a significant fraction of the world's population."[4] Thus, as the costs of digital technology steadily decline, opportunities for a multitude of cooperative activities can rapidly expand, beyond the strictures of private property.

Crucial in Benkler's view are the ways in which large numbers of people from different locations and from different walks of life have seized on the opportunities presented by the Internet to devise new ways of working together and new modes of self-expression and community life. Among the new tools for effective, large-scale cooperation are file sharing; peer production (e.g., Wikipedia); new vehicles for news and commentary; new business models; new relationships between musicians, artists, and their audiences—the list goes on and on. Benkler draws upon a wide range of examples to clarify the social benefits of this new economy. But perhaps most important in his view are the ways in which an emergent "networked public sphere" offers opportunities for the revitalization of the basic practices of liberal democracy. He writes, "In the net-

worked information environment, everyone is free to observe, report, question, and debate, not only in principle, but in actual capability. . . . We are witnessing a fundamental change in how individuals can interact with their democracy and experience their roles as citizens."[5] He argues that citizens are no longer put in the position of passively watching the news. No longer are they dependent on professional journalists or the judgments of media managers. Beyond the lures of consumerism and mass media entertainment lies a revitalized public realm, an Internet-centered democracy open to everyone.

It is important to note that as Benkler describes these developments, he explicitly refuses to endorse any form of technological utopianism or technological determinism. Not at all a prerequisite somehow embodied within the hardware or software of digital networks, the beneficial qualities of the network spring forth as an unanticipated gift to citizens everywhere. He concludes, "There is no inevitable historical force that drives the technological-economic moment toward an open, diverse, liberal equilibrium."[6] The outcome might have been otherwise. In fact, Benkler notes, even now there are recurring attempts to put the genie back in the bottle, to move the new information economy back into the old industrial model—centralized, proprietary, bureaucratized, permission-based forms of organization on which the large media firms rely. His misgivings on this score echo the analyses of media scholars Robert McChesney and Tim Wu, who have shown how earlier media technologies—radio and television, for example—were praised in their early stages for the open, communitarian, democratic possibilities they offered society, and how they eventually yielded to the domination of large, centralized, money-seeking, corporate organization and control.[7] Given the demise of citizen-centered creativity within these earlier episodes in the history of electronic media, hopes for different outcomes in the evolution of computer networks fall under an ominous shadow.

Indeed, during the years that followed the publication of *The Wealth of Networks*, the patterns of monopoly control and oligarchical power that afflicted earlier forms of electronic communication began to characterize the platforms of digital networking as well. Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon have achieved unparalleled dominance, handily eluding the

infrequent, feeble, fumbling government attempts to regulate their expansion and conditions of operation. While the open, cooperative, artistic, cultural, and civic activities Benkler extols can still be detected in secluded corridors of the Internet, they are relatively insignificant within the vast, deeply rooted institutions that now govern most of what happens in people's daily experience of computing power.

Beyond the obvious dangers to democracy presented by dominant monopolies in communication and political oligarchy, one finds new Internet-centered maladies that threaten to undermine the most basic institutions and practices of governance. Within the settings provided by social media platforms, there has arisen a growing collection of ingenious malefactors deploying well-orchestrated campaigns of targeted messaging and "computational propaganda" on news feeds to infect and subvert what had earlier been celebrated as revitalized processes of democratic participation. By deploying surreptitious "troll farms" with large staffs of message makers along with extensive aggregations of computerized "bots" able to mimic human communications, bad actors can tune the content of politically relevant messages on the Internet from distant locations to influence national elections and policy debates. This power stems from the collection and manipulation of the personal data of millions of individual users of Internet platforms, persons who regularly, often unthinkingly, sign away the right to protect the data kept on the views, preferences, and activities they express online. Using such personal data, companies such as Cambridge Analytica were evidently able to target specific blocs of voters, tipping the balance of the 2016 presidential election in Donald Trump's favor.[8] Pointing to vulnerabilities and attacks on Facebook and elsewhere that now characterize the infosphere, computer security professional Bruce Schneier warned the U.S. Congress that "the internet era of fun and games is over, because the internet is now dangerous."[9]

A fundamental peril is that the integrity of political institutions and processes may, in the long term, be undermined, and the populace may eventually lose confidence in their validity. Given what is widely understood to be the corrupt, illegitimate outcome of the U.S. 2016 election, it is clear that this is already happening and likely to continue. Looking forward, one must ask, Will it be the votes of autonomous citizens that

decide the most crucial political outcomes? Or will the forces of cyberwarfare—trolls, bots, insidious algorithms, and rapidly spreading forms of political malware—ultimately determine the future of political society?

The Most Important Thing on Earth?

The technology-related troubles for democracy discussed so far—monopoly, corporate control, oligarchy, computational propaganda, and the loss of integrity of democratic institutions—are located primarily in the domain of large, power-holding institutions and must somehow be addressed there. Indeed, provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union, in effect since May 2018, offer citizens somewhat improved control over their personal data.[10] In contrast, within the neoliberal, free market of the U.S., the citizenry must be content with vague promises from media giants like Facebook and Google that public-spirited corporations will tweak their precious algorithms in attempts to identify and eliminate sources of data malfeasance.

Beyond this space of troubles, serious threats to democracy also reside at the level of people's personal involvements with today's communications technologies and devices. We can begin to understand this danger by exploring the question, Who are we on the Internet? More precisely, who am I, who are you? Indeed, who is anybody on the Internet?

To explore these questions, it is useful to recall one of the most audacious, wonderfully bizarre experiments on electronic media and human experience ever concocted. It took place in the early 1990s, at a time when a new regime of communications—cable television—was first being introduced into American homes. Within this new media universe, American TV viewers were no longer limited to a handful of local stations but had access to a great many (and eventually hundreds) of channels available on cable and satellite systems. As a way to explore this phenomenon, Bill McKibben—renowned writer and activist on environmental issues—made arrangements with several dozen families in Fairfax, Virginia, who had been newly wired with cable TV. He provided equipment to each family to videotape all the programs on one designated channel during a single twenty-four-hour period. McKibben

collected the videotapes from all the ninety-three recorded channels captured by the cooperating families. He then returned to his home in upstate New York, where he spent several months watching all the shows—literally every moment of cable TV—from just one day of programing.

McKibben did not employ a sophisticated research protocol from media studies, discourse analysis, or science and technology studies. He paid no attention to the theories and concepts of social construction, actor networks, flexible interpretation, or research symmetry that commonly engage scholars in science and technology studies. His question was simple; in fact, it was the very same one that typical viewers ask as they turn on their television sets: What's on? What is on the TV screen?[11]

At the completion of his project of total immersion, he was able to report a key finding, something fundamental and crucial that was almost completely absent from the new and celebrated infosphere: *a direct experience with nature*. He writes:

> I assumed unconsciously that the information that poured from the TV into my quite similar suburban world was all the information there was. . . . But there's another real world. A realer world, maybe—certainly an older one. This world is full of information, information that grows inevitably in you the more time you spend there, the stiller you are. . . . That's the one great hopeful possibility; this other world broadcasts round the clock, and in stereo and sensurround and smellavision. Its signal grows steadily fainter, and the noise of the modern world makes it ever harder to hear. But it's still there.[12]

McKibben returns to the question of what's on from a different angle, asking if it is possible to identify an underlying premise in the content of all television in the 1980s and 1990s, regardless of explicit topic or overall content. And he decides that, yes, it certainly is possible!

> Much came across the cable in my endless day, of course—the insights, such as they are, make up the content of my study. But the most important message is one that really occurred to me somewhat later: If you filter out all the messages that television sends you, if you boil the sap down into syrup—there's an underlying premise: *You are the most important thing on earth.* You sitting there on the sofa, clutching the remote, are the heaviest object in the known universe. Around you

must everything orbit. This Bud's for *you* (McKibben, 1992, 2006).[13]

McKibben goes on to specify how this premise plays itself out in numerous domains of American life—patterns of consumption, the widely reported flight from community involvement, and hyperindividualist preferences expressed in all corners of social life. Eventually he comes to the then (early 2000s) fairly novel field of people's experience on the Internet and finds that the magnified "You" is taking root there as well. "You can spend a lifetime on the Web with people Just Like You, which is a kind of solipsism not that far removed from the hyperindividualism I've been describing."[14]

From TV to Internet

Today it is increasingly clear that the obsessive solipsism McKibben identified has been scrupulously reproduced and magnified on the Internet in its mature form. Emphasized yet again is the centrality of the "Me"—self-satisfaction, self-identity, self-absorption—sought in people's engagement with various forms of social media. There is, however, a crucial difference between the variety of hyperindividualism characteristic of TV and that now common on the Internet. During the golden age of television the emphasis on "Me" was largely passive and receptive. People were situated as receivers of information that sought to impress them with a sense of self-importance as viewers, as consumers of products, and as potential voters. The crucial role for TV viewers was to absorb the messages, a mode of being that left them easily manipulated by advertising and propaganda.

To a considerable extent, the possibilities offered by the Internet, especially within prominent venues of social media, are far more active. The Internet offers opportunities for broadcasting one's own marvelous personhood and for seeking spaces in which the amplification of the "Me" finally becomes a readily available project, one potentially accessible to anyone active online. It is a world in which a person seeks to obtain "likes," "friends," "followers," "retweets," and so on. Measures of success and income are tabulated by the number of affirmations that show up on social media–counting registers: How many

Facebook friends and likes have I attracted today? Have my tweets been retweeted by hundreds or thousands of others? Is my influence growing or shrinking?

Social scientists who study the inner workings of social media platforms report that the very essence of platforms involves a distinctive kind of addiction. The algorithms that monitor people's activities and interactions on the Internet are able to track and remember the "revealed preferences" of their users. A revealed preference is one discovered by observing the actual choices people make as compared to those they explicitly list as their desires and commitments.[15] Hence, I may tell you (and fully believe) that my favorite meal is a good salad made with organic vegetables. However, if you were to leave a carton of chocolate ice cream on the table, you might observe me grabbing a spoon and devouring the whole thing. "That's his revealed preference," you would conclude, "not what he claims are his true desires."

During the past fifteen years or so, the major digital platforms have grown skillful at recording, tracking, and analyzing the revealed preferences of hundreds of millions of users. As you make choices on the Internet, algorithms are able to place in front of you more choices that are like ones you've made before. On YouTube, for example, if you go looking for a particular genre of hip-hop music, your first choice will be followed—often automatically, without any further input from you—by a whole collection of songs relatively similar in kind, an array that can easily "autoplay" for hours. Having calculated your revealed preferences, Internet algorithms are able to generate more and more of what you signaled you liked earlier. The more time you spend on your device, the more likely it is that you'll see advertisements for products that appeal to you. The algorithm will notice and record the searches you do, the websites you visit, and the articles you read and will start feeding you similar materials. All of this fits perfectly with the business models of Facebook, Google, and other firms hosting advertisements and commercial promotions. What they offer is something earlier electronic media could not; namely, the ability to put sellers of goods in close touch with buyers who are most likely to be interested in what is being sold.[16] In important respects, such practices mirror the methods of operant conditioning explored in the research of mid-twentieth-century behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner.

The addictive features of social media are closely related to another crucial fact about their presence in people's lives: that Internet applications are usually completely "free." As in the exhortation of the drug pusher—"Hey, give it a try. The first bag of heroin is on the house!"—the appeal of many Internet platforms is that users pay nothing for the use of their beguiling services. Facebook is free. Gmail and many of the other applications on Google cost nothing. Something for nothing! What a deal! But the unfortunate price people end up paying is to yield unthinkingly to various kinds of encoded manipulation (especially political manipulation), varieties of misinformation, computational propaganda, and political malware engineered by Cambridge Analytica and similar organizations.

Following the electoral meltdown of 2016 in the U.S. and the waves of racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and antiscience, antienvironmentalist, and authoritarian politics it unleashed, research on the technical and social dimensions of the Internet has taken an astonishing turn. Leaving aside the optimism of earlier times that "the more connected people are, the better society will be," scholars have begun tracking the dark side of the Internet. A systematic study at MIT followed the choices of some three million Twitter users over a ten-year period and found that among 126,000 contested news stories, people much preferred (and were more likely to share) falsehoods over well-verified, reliable information. "Fake news and false rumors reach more people, penetrate deeper into the social network, and spread much faster than accurate stories," the report concludes.[17] In a similar vein, Internet guru and former Google "design ethicist" Tristan Harris now openly laments social maladies on the Internet, such as the tendency for people to favor sheer outrage over well-founded information and to express highly negative emotions in their social media postings.[18]

A Plague of Narcissism

It seems plausible that many of the distressing social and political ills that have recently surfaced on the Internet have their roots in an obsessive narcissism similar to the one McKibben noticed in the world of television. In this case, the narcissism manifests as a sense of personal identity that continually seeks to affirm and even to broadcast a self-absorbed, highly troubled

"Me." Earlier dreams of the Internet envisioned it as a meeting ground in which citizens engaged in vibrant, fruitful conversation, debating key issues in truth-seeking ways, striving to affirm the common good, and working together to improve public policies. This vision has now been largely supplanted by an Internet culture that elicits excesses of self-absorbed individualism busily seeking affirmation in the friends, likes, followers, and other data that platforms collect as clickbait to support a person's sense of importance.

Closely associated with this epidemic of narcissistic selfhood is a tendency in contemporary political societies to elevate demagogues, particularly those with flagrantly self-admiring personalities, to positions of leadership. The rise of Trump and of other flamboyantly authoritarian figures in ostensibly democratic societies points to ways in which narcissism has become infectious, to the detriment of even the most basic notions of good governance. Postelection analyses suggest Trump's popularity is due to anxiety about loss of status among a substantial portion of the American populace—the fear that one's social standing is now endangered as threatening "others" move up.[19] To a considerable extent, such anxieties have their roots in an underlying racism, since people of color are often perceived as a menace to white people's security. In his narcissistic demeanor and rhetoric, Trump plays upon such feelings in masterful ways. Early in his term as president Trump was strongly favored by roughly 40 percent of the U.S. populace. His supporters were people who did not necessarily favor his policies but who were attracted by his strongly self-centered, increasingly authoritarian mode of presentation, one often punctuated by explicit appeals to racial resentment.[20]

It is no coincidence that the Trump phenomenon and the kinds of self-obsession prominent on social media have been strongly validated within a right-wing ideology heavily promoted in the U.S. in recent decades—libertarianism. With an emphasis on "liberty" of unencumbered individuals, this vision of society demands the removal of most forms of state power and authority beyond those of basic national defense. Celebrated in the novels of Ayn Rand and codified in the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, James Buchanan, and members of the Mont Pelerin Society, the libertarian worldview upholds the bold, creative activities of

entrepreneurs within the so-called free market as the path to utopia.[21] Rejecting social obligations to others and any commitment to the common good, libertarians seek the realization of exquisite selfhood achieved through the accumulation of personal wealth. Completely explicit in its ego-centeredness, this school of thought offers an air of legitimacy to the manias of narcissistic leadership and authoritarian domination. To a considerable extent, libertarianism has emerged as the de facto worldview of a generation of twenty-first-century billionaire oligarchs. Increasingly free from the kinds of government intervention they despise, wealthy power brokers such as Robert Mercer and Charles and David Koch have been able to amass enormous power within communications systems as well as national politics.[22]

In my view the cultivation of personal selfhood and self-absorbed communication on the Internet is completely compatible with the rise of narcissistic, ultimately antidemocratic forms of political activity. Far from offering a new, vital democratic alternative to rigid social hierarchy and centralized government, today's culture of the Internet and social media could become a seedbed for concentrated, ultimately authoritarian power. This predicament stands at the heart of many of the social and civic maladies that have recently surfaced on the Internet and in political societies around the globe.

Private and Public Realms

Who are we on the Internet? A revealing source of insight into this question, one highly relevant to the currently frustrated hopes of realizing democracy on the Internet, can be found in the writings of political theorist and historian Hannah Arendt. Especially in her books *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*, Arendt seeks to explain what constitutes genuine involvement in politics.[23]

Crucial to Arendt's theory is the distinction between the private realm and the public realm. Affairs in the private realm are those that involve intimate relationships with family and friends, and activities that are highly personal, self-defined, and self-determined. Within the spaces of private life a person can carefully establish and maintain a solid, stable, carefully nurtured definition of who he or she is. In contrast, the public realm is

a space where a person encounters the plurality of others and confronts questions that pertain to political society as a whole. Arendt argues that the public realm is necessarily a "space of appearances" in which one's identity is revealed not by a personally determined and carefully protected sense of self but rather by speech and action—what one says and does in public gatherings. That is to say, in a genuine public realm one's identity is recognized and continually evaluated by others. Hence, a person will likely have a well-defined sense of self within their own thoughts, within their family, and within their circle of intimate friends. But this is not the self that appears or is realized within the public realm. As Arendt observes in her chapter "Action," "the 'who,' which appears so clearly and mistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimōn* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters."[24] Arendt argues that a person's involvements in the public sphere are what can truly be called "action," and, going even further, she contends that one's continuing experience in that realm is the singular, unique experience properly called "freedom."

From the theoretical standpoint Arendt offers, it is clear that the all-too-common attempts by people in online political communication to define, protect, cling to, and incessantly broadcast their personal identities stands at the root of the various discourse pathologies commonly encountered on the Internet today—"trolling," "flaming," "bullying," and the like. People carry treasured images and ideas of their private identities and expect that those identities will be robust in the public realm as well. The ultimate good to be achieved within networks of social media is, in B. F. Skinner's model, a steady flow of "reinforcement." Conceits of this kind, Arendt insists, are woefully misguided. A person is neither entitled to nor empowered to define *who* he or she is within the activities of public life. It is one's fellow citizens, those who listen, observe, interact, and ultimately judge one's words and deeds, who determine one's lasting reputation as a public being. In the fullness of time some persons will be remembered and praised as worthy contributors to the good of political society. The very best of these may eventually achieve lasting fame or even glory, as Machiavelli named this reputational aura, within the

community as well as in historical memory, a kind of immortality for those who truly distinguish themselves in their words and deeds. Others are scorned as ignorant, ill-tempered, greedy, untrustworthy, and even destructive within deliberations and initiatives formulated in the public realm.

As Arendt explains, what is essential to the public realm is the plurality of persons and the needs of and challenges to political society as a whole. Regardless of how cleverly and insistently a person may seek to project a private definition of selfhood into the public, the projection is very likely to fail because the perceptions and judgments of others will ultimately determine *who one is* within the public realm—a trusted advocate for the common good or, perhaps, a self-seeking scoundrel.

Arendt's argument implies that, by and large, most modern nation-states have failed to create suitable institutional spaces for the activities that characterize the public realm. In her view, this condition does not arise by oversight or accident but is instead a product of the deliberate machinations of political parties and those who rise to power in times of social upheaval. Arendt's book *On Revolution* concludes with a chapter titled "The Revolution and Its Lost Treasure." She notices that within upheavals of modern revolutions, people involved at the level of everyday mobilization often took it upon themselves to form institutions, small-scale forums of participation—workers' councils, citizens' councils, town meetings, and the like. For example, in the 1917 Russian Revolution, the original "soviets" were local councils of workers. Within the spontaneously formed revolutionary councils, people came together to debate ends and means, to articulate strategies, and, as Arendt insists, to experience freedom in the presence of other citizens. She argues that people's ardent desire to discuss political ideas in a public forum and to experience political choices and their consequences in direct, tangible ways is a primary motivation that has erupted regularly in the course of modern revolutions.

Alas, in the fullness of time, these spontaneous, directly democratic forums were destroyed by revolutionary leaders who placed their faith in the formation of the modern state, the workings of central governments, and the dynamics of large, national political parties. In the American Revolution, for example, the constitutional founders could have included within the Constitution a creative role for the town meetings that had

sprung up spontaneously during the revolutionary period. It might have been possible to build political society with these gathering places at the base linked to higher levels of political activity in a kind of ascending pyramid.

Instead, what the leaders of the American Revolution did in a carefully crafted strategy was to organize a large governmental structure of elected representatives from local and regional districts and abruptly eliminate any role for town meetings or equivalent citizen forums. Thus, the ultimate treasure of the revolution—the immediate, lived experience of public life—was lost. While town meetings are still held each year in various parts of New England, they mainly handle matters of local policy, taxation, and spending and are not linked in any way to national issues or priorities. The general lack of town meetings and similar citizen councils as a feature of national government is evident each day as people go on the Internet and tune in to what they believe to be forums for public deliberation and debate. They may not notice what is missing from this pseudopublic realm and how that yawning absence helps generate wave after wave of toxic discourse along with distressing patterns of oligarchical rule, incipient authoritarianism, and governance by phonies and confidence men.

Hope for Repair

AN OBVIOUS BUT EXCESSIVELY difficult solution might be to somehow link the now-abstract, narcissistic digital realm to the lived experience of face-to-face, in-person, democratic public assemblies. Indeed, scholar-activists like Doug Schuler have attempted to promote "civic networks" and the arts of "civic intelligence." But as yet there are no feasible models for doing anything of that kind. Instead, what is slowly emerging is an awareness of the widespread social and personal pathologies now visible on the Internet as well as a number of strategies for addressing them.

Recently "tech humanists" in Silicon Valley, mainly employees or former employees of computer industry corporations, have taken it upon themselves to study and cure the kinds of addiction that are part and parcel of the algorithms and business models at firms such as Facebook. The web page of the Center for Humane Technology asserts that our society is being

"hijacked" by technology. It argues that "what began as a race to monetize our attention is now eroding the pillars of our society: mental health, democracy, social relationships, and our children." Their report goes beyond the happy talk of "a world of connections" to specify ways in which digital platforms have become an increasingly toxic presence in everyday life:

> Snapchat turns conversations into streaks, redefining how our children measure friendship.
> Instagram glorifies the picture-perfect life, eroding our self-worth.
> Facebook segregates us into echo chambers, fragmenting our communities.
> YouTube autoplays the next video within seconds, even if it eats into our sleep.
> These are not neutral products. They are part of a system designed to addict us.[25]

Using language that balances benefits and risks while carefully distributing responsibility for possible harms, the Center for Humane Technology offers the following analysis:

> Phones, apps, and the web are so indispensable to our daily lives—a testament to the benefits they give us—that we've become a captive audience. With two billion people plugged into these devices, technology companies have inadvertently enabled a direct channel to manipulate entire societies with unprecedented precision. Technology platforms make it easier than ever for bad actors to cause havoc:
>
> > Pushing lies directly to specific zip codes, races, or religions.
> > Finding people who are already prone to conspiracies or racism, and automatically reaching similar users with "Lookalike" targeting.
> > Delivering messages timed to prey on us when we are most emotionally vulnerable (e.g., Facebook found depressed teens buy more makeup).
> > Creating millions of fake accounts and bots impersonating real people with real-sounding names and photos, fooling millions with the false impression of consensus.
>
> Meanwhile, the platform companies profit from growth in users and activity.[26]

The use of such terms as "inadvertently" and "bad actors" signals that the center wants to avoid appearing critical of Silicon

Valley enterprises as a whole. Its underlying message is that the technologies are basically just fine, merely subject to occasional lapses, unintended consequences, and the schemes of evildoers. Even though its own analysis points to the fact that Facebook and other firms have deliberately engineered their products to be addictive, the center's web page faults them not for any malign intent but only for blindly seeking profit.

The proposals of the tech humanists emphasize a need for "humane design," a collection of technological fixes that selectively eliminate harmful features of digital technology. Thus, the Center for Humane Technology suggests that Apple, Samsung, and Microsoft "can redesign their devices and core interfaces to protect our minds from constant distractions, minimize screen time, protect our time in relationships. . . ."[27] One project of this kind is Tristan Harris's Time Well Spent, a nonprofit organization that seeks to alter the software of Internet platforms so that their users are encouraged to go beyond the trivial habits that social media support and to draw upon more deeply resonant "values," especially the time they spend in meaningful relationships with other people. Warming to this challenge, in early 2018 Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, took steps to appropriate the Time Well Spent project as an attractive option within Facebook's elaborate settings. From a commercial standpoint, however, the experiment proved problematic, since it led to a decrease of 50 million hours in users' time per day on Facebook, a potentially serious hit to the firm's advertising revenues.[28]

Remedies of this sort resonate with another Silicon Valley fashion of recent years—the sponsorship of "wellness" programs for corporate personnel. Often expressed in special sessions offering yoga and meditation during the workday or at special retreats, training in these skills is seen as a boost to one's personal health and an important contribution to a firm's capacity for innovation. It comes as no surprise that, once again, the basic purpose of the wellness industry is to discover and enhance the exquisite "Me" from which all else is believed to flow. The idea now is to go more deeply within oneself to find one's true ground of being.[29]

As a modest political expression of their quest, tech humanists advocate joining with others to "apply political pressure" on lawmakers to advance creative reforms. The Center for Humane Technology explains, "Governments can pressure tech-

nology companies toward humane business models by including the negative externalities of attention extraction on their balance sheets, and creating better protection for consumers."[30] But protection of what kind? Presumably a better shielded autonomy for one's beloved sense of self.

A more useful step would be to seek forms of politically humane technology by exploring ways to build links between Internet communications and forums for face-to-face citizen debate, cooperation, and policy making. If, as Arendt argues, "the lost treasure of the revolution" involves small, local democratic groups able to affect larger national political outcomes, then the obvious challenge is to start building and invigorating these bodies again. Salvation of a now-fading democracy is readily at hand, I would argue, if only that path were to be chosen. The fact that most leaders of modern revolutions have consciously, deliberately rejected institutions of direct democracy is no reason to replicate their failings within today's public realms, ones that might (even now) connect online and face-to-face political life in the years to come.

Alas, even in proposed remedies for today's flagrant abuses of online power it is still the concerns of consumerism and techno-narcissism that are emphasized above all. From the perspective of Hannah Arendt there is as yet in today's discussions and practices of online "politics" little or no understanding that moving into the public realm entails relinquishing "the private self, the cherished self of our hopes and dreams" and becoming a person who makes himself or herself "known in word and deed." This means, in effect, that genuine political participation involves the advent of a second self, one whose character is ultimately determined by the perceptions and judgments of one's fellow citizens and of historical memory, not of oneself alone.

While possibilities of this kind may seem abstract and inaccessible, a closer look reveals some basic down-to-earth choices. In important ways the pathway to a lively citizenship begins with the simple choice to "show up!"—to attend public meetings, to join public groups, to march in demonstrations, to speak up in civic gatherings, and to become active in groups that seek to address and improve the institutions and practices of community life. In every city, town, or village of the nation, opportunities of this kind are readily available and are well worth exploring.[31]

Arendt believed that to enter the public realm is a potentially marvelous step. For it reveals a person in entirely new settings and in a surprising new light, offering fruitful courses of action for the community as a whole. And yes, of necessity, to engage in action in the public realm involves risk, including the risk of highly uncertain, perhaps even perilous, outcomes both for oneself and for the others one encounters. Fortunately, experiences of this kind may well generate something otherwise completely unattainable—genuine political freedom.