

Why is everyone so suicidal on social media?

Owen Earl

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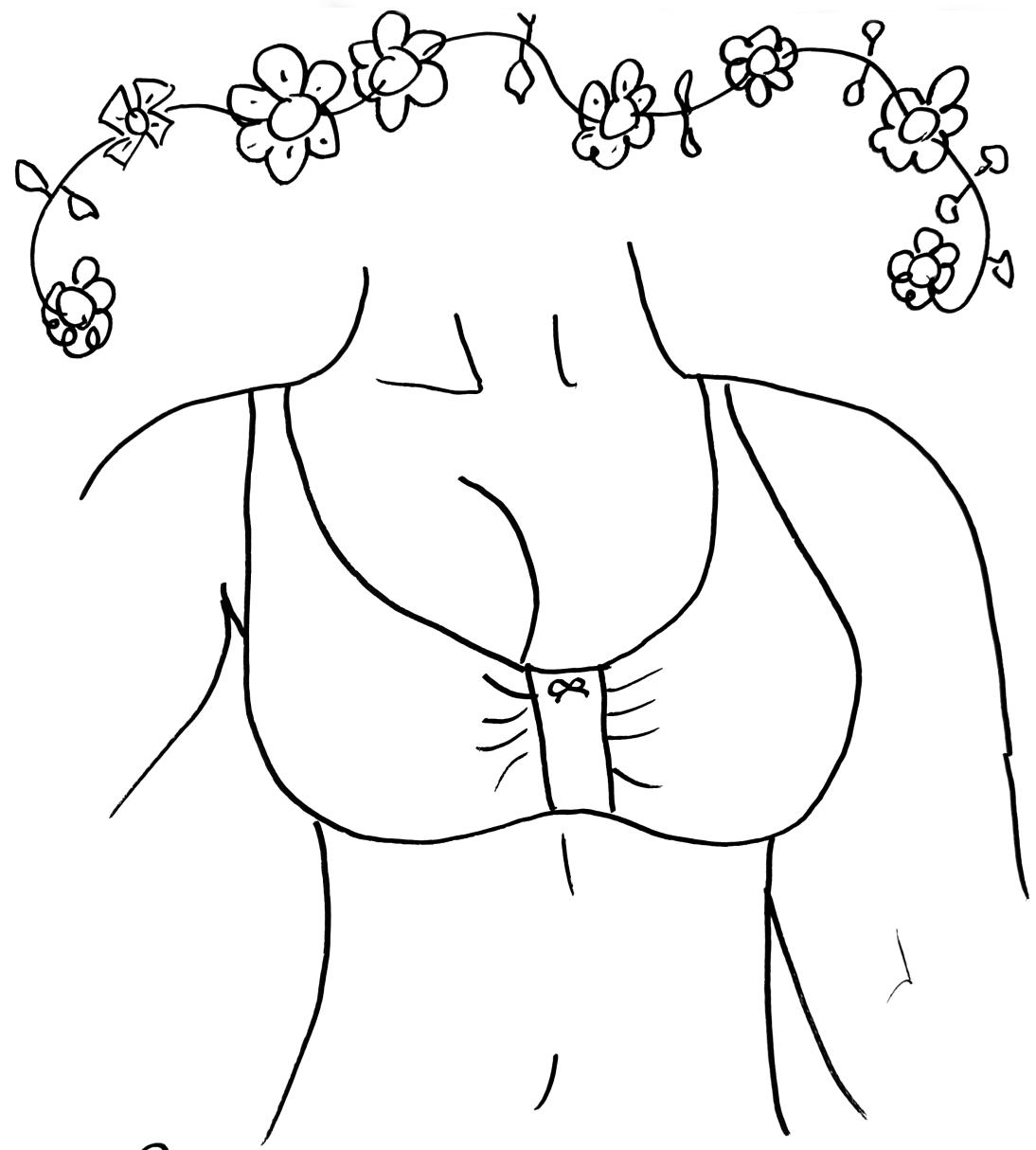
At first glance Amalia Ulman's Instagram page looks typical. She's young, maybe in her twenties. She posts pictures of avocado toast, pastel outfits, motivational quotes. There are a lot of flowers and flower colors. Sometimes she posts sexy photos. She likes art and books apparently, and can be skeptical of people. There isn't much to distinguish one post from the next, they all kind of blend together into a happy colorful feminine latte art timeline.

(Ulman)

On August 8th she posted a photo of her holding a gun. Later that day she posted two videos of her sobbing. She doesn't say anything, she just cries. The videos aren't well lit.

The next post comes from the 14th. It's a heart drawn in the frost on a window pane.

"feeling blessed for all my internet friends who sent wonderful recovery messages on fb.
I'm really sorry if I have offended you."



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The next post is a cat with a flower crown on its head. Then a well designed kitchen. Then a motivational quote.

Every post is about how happy and grateful she is. How perfect her life is, and how perfect she is. It's as if, for a fleeting moment on a single day the mask slips and we glimpse a moment of something that resembles authenticity before the mask is quickly shoved back on.

If you go through the posts leading up to August 8th, a darker picture emerges. It's obscured by the fact that at every turn Amalia paints her life through rose-colored glasses, but you'll start to notice things. She's taking pole-dancing lessons. She's getting a boob job. She's making \$1000 for a single night's work. It seems like she's starting to do heavy drugs. Underneath a facade of feminine perfection is a life that's spiraling out of control.

Amalia Ulman revealed that her Instagram from this time was staged. This was a work of art. It's a very moving piece, and its themes and materials bring up



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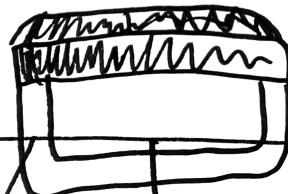
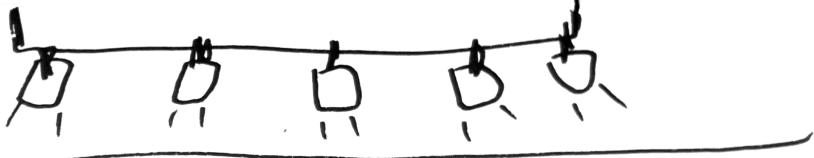
questions about social media, what it is and how we relate to it. (Connor)

Art made from Social Media

The piece is called "Excellences and Perfections." It is undoubtedly a work of art. I would ask a simple question: What is it made out of?

It's a page on Instagram, and one could reasonably argue that it's a photography series, but this group of images in a gallery space would not read the same way. In fact, to divorce this piece from its social media context would destroy an essential part of it. It would go from being captivating and devastating to largely illegible. These series of images, without the knowledge that they are the photos a young woman is using to define her existence to the outside world, are somewhat random and generally uninteresting. (Duguid)

"Excellences and Perfections" is, in a way, made of social media. Social media is a space that the piece occupies, but it is also a core element that the piece is constructed from. The photos, the timeline, the captions, these things are what make up social media, and they are what make up this piece.



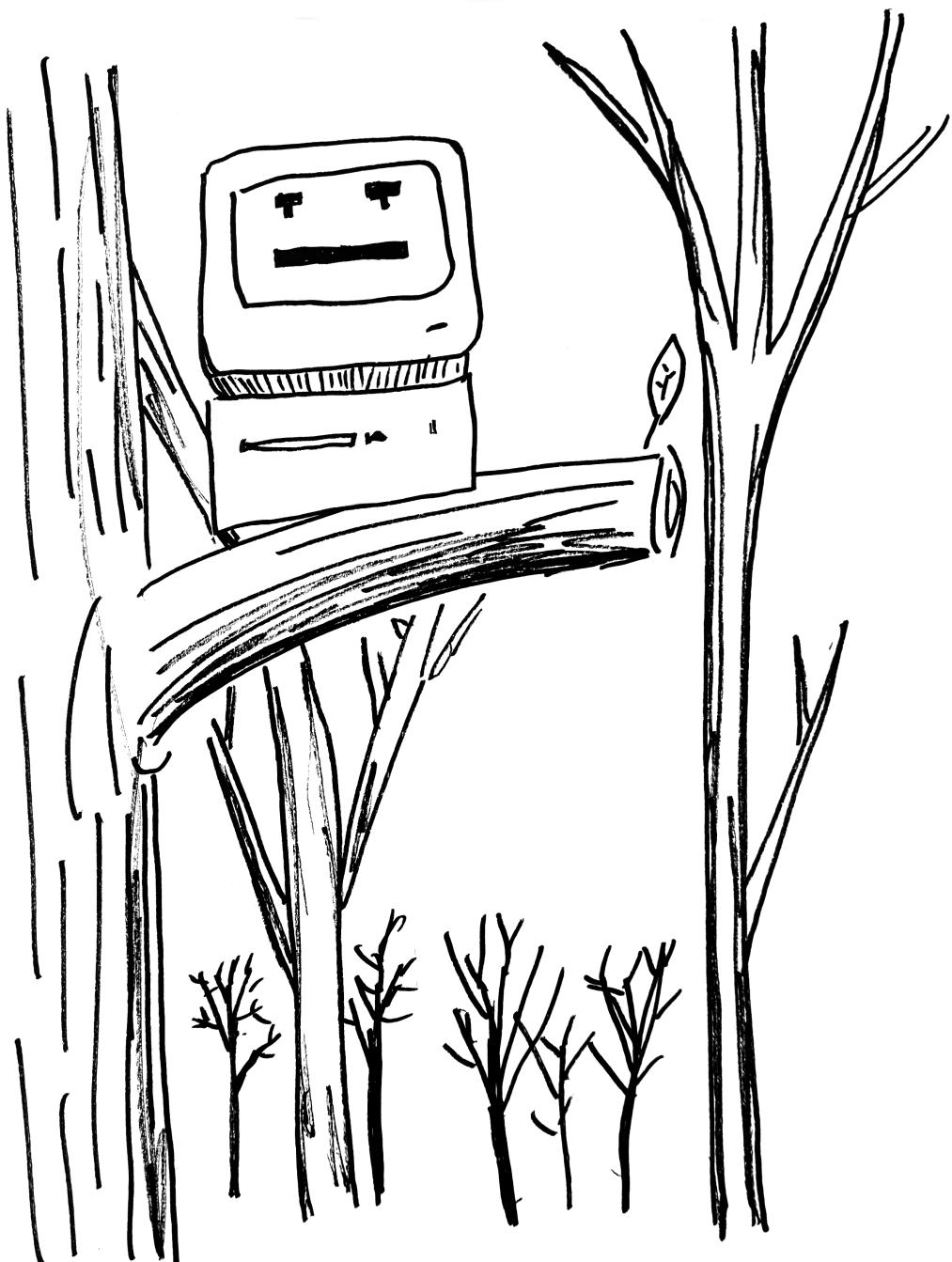
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It is far from the only piece of art to be made from social media. The piece “Listen and Repeat” by Rachel Knoll reads tweets complaining about how no one listens into a forest. The tweets are read by a computer (Knoll). The piece “Lonely Tweets” by Paul Neave endlessly lists tweets from people complaining about how lonely they feel (Neave).

When looking at these pieces, a pattern starts to emerge. Many of them deal with similar themes. Isolation, alienation, feeling disconnected in a connected world.

Anyone who’s familiar with contemporary internet culture won’t be surprised by this, because there’s another type of social media art that’s much more common and is exploring some of the same stuff: memes.

There are so many memes about feelings of social anxiety, depression, and even thoughts of suicide that to point to specific examples would be a largely arbitrary exercise. It’s something that is so common it’s become largely invisible, just part of the everyday fabric of the internet.



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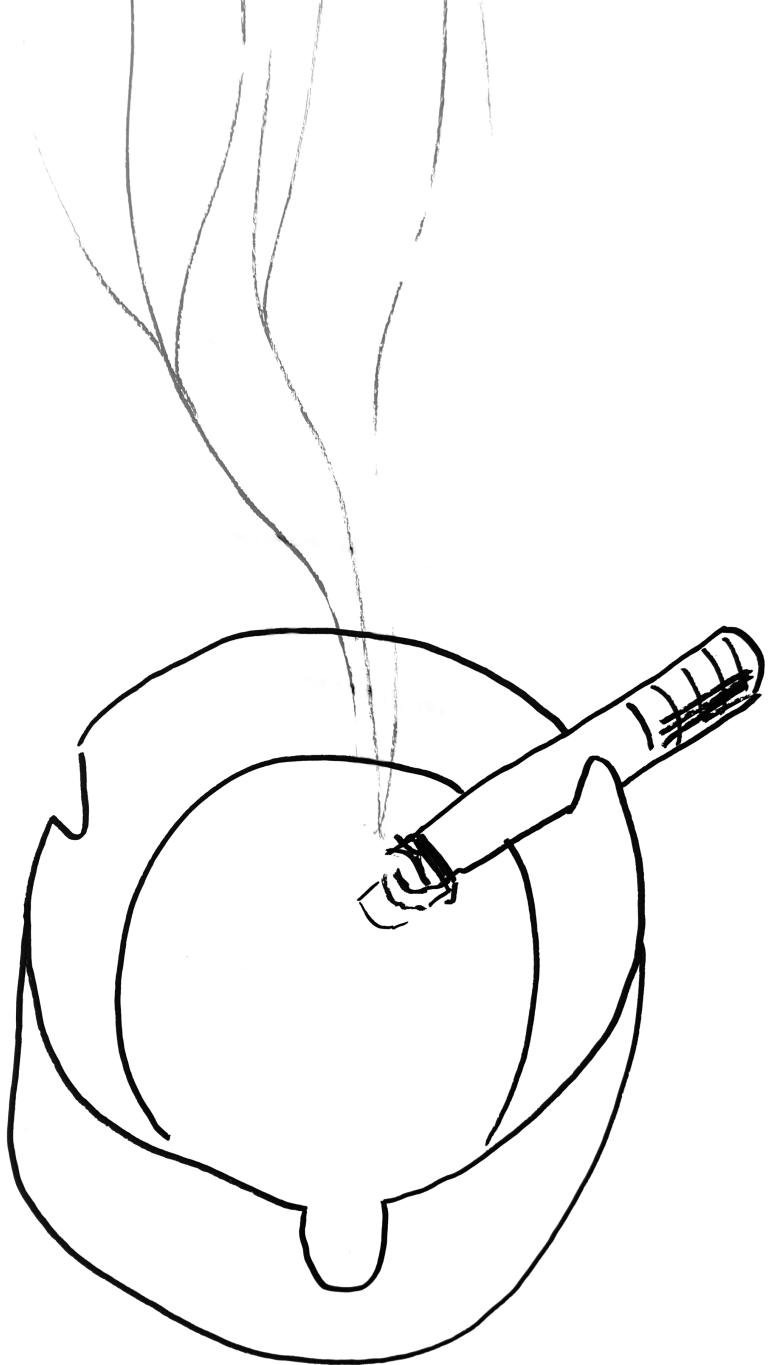
Why are people so depressed, and why are they expressing it online? (Lorenz)

Social Media Causes Depression

It's those kids and their damn phones! Study after study has indicated that increased social media use is heavily correlated with negative feelings such as anxiety or depression (Hunt) (Shakya). Social media is likely more addictive than cigarettes, and it's making all the people who are using it unsatisfied with themselves (Meikle). It shouldn't be totally surprising then, that people who are on social media are feeling somewhat depressed and that they would choose to use social media as the platform to express those feelings. Maybe the reason so many people are expressing these negative feelings and experiences on social media is because the people on those platforms are being made to feel that way.

Wait but... What is social media again?

I'm not disputing any of the research that suggests there's a relationship between feelings of anxiety and social isolation with social media use. The research is solid, has been peer-reviewed, and is reproducible. It is perhaps noteworthy, though, how large a variety of news sources report on these



Social media is likely more addictive than cigarettes

findings. Everyone from Forbes to Mary Claire magazine is writing about the connection between social media use and depression. (Hills) (Walton)

The reason I find this confusing is because this situation kind of begs the question, what is social media? Where does it exist? What distinguishes social media from other kinds of media?

The truth is the answer to this question is very difficult. Social media is an incredibly nebulous concept, and these news sources that are publishing these stories about how depressed social media is making all of us don't go into much detail about what social media is.

Social media is media that is made accessible through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit. Much of this media is hosted on those platforms. For example, any status that anyone posts on Facebook only exists on Facebook. It is media that is both made accessible through Facebook but also exists only within the Facebook platform.

However there is also a significant chunk of this media that exists outside of the social media



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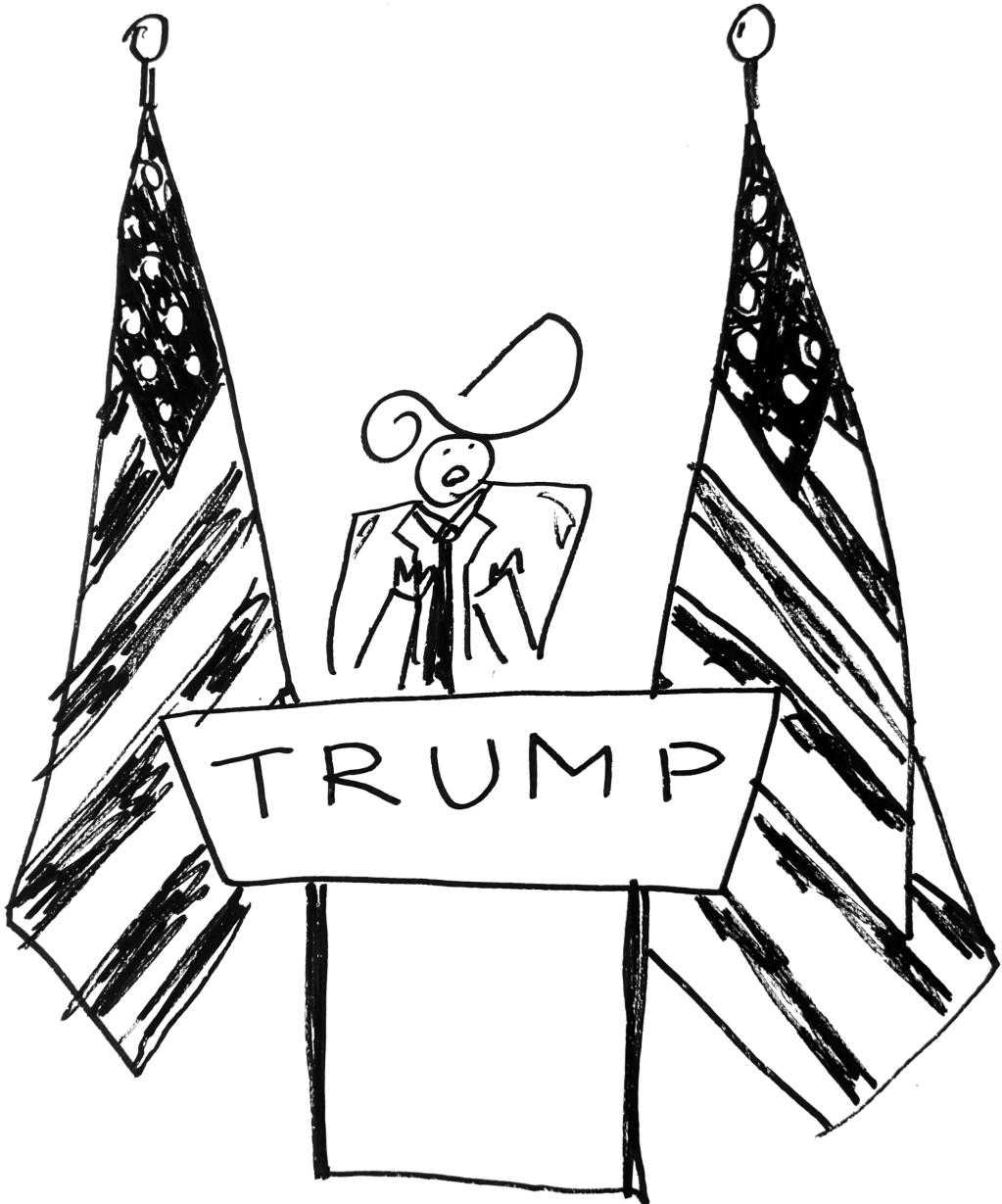
platform. When someone shares a link to a photo on Reddit or someone tweets a news article, the media that they're sharing exists outside of their respective platforms.

In the United States 2016 presidential election, Russians interfered. They abused social media platforms such as Facebook to spread misinformation in order to swing the election.

One of their tactics was to create fake news sites and encourage the dissemination of that misinformation through the Facebook platform. Many people and news organizations conceptualized this as Russian's weaponizing social media in order to spread misinformation. Embedded in that narrative is the idea that media that exists outside of a social media platform, but is made accessible through that social media platform, is a kind of social media.
(Ogburn)

If it's something that people access because it's linked to on a social media platform then it's social media.

However this comes with the implication that all of the news sites writing articles about how harmful



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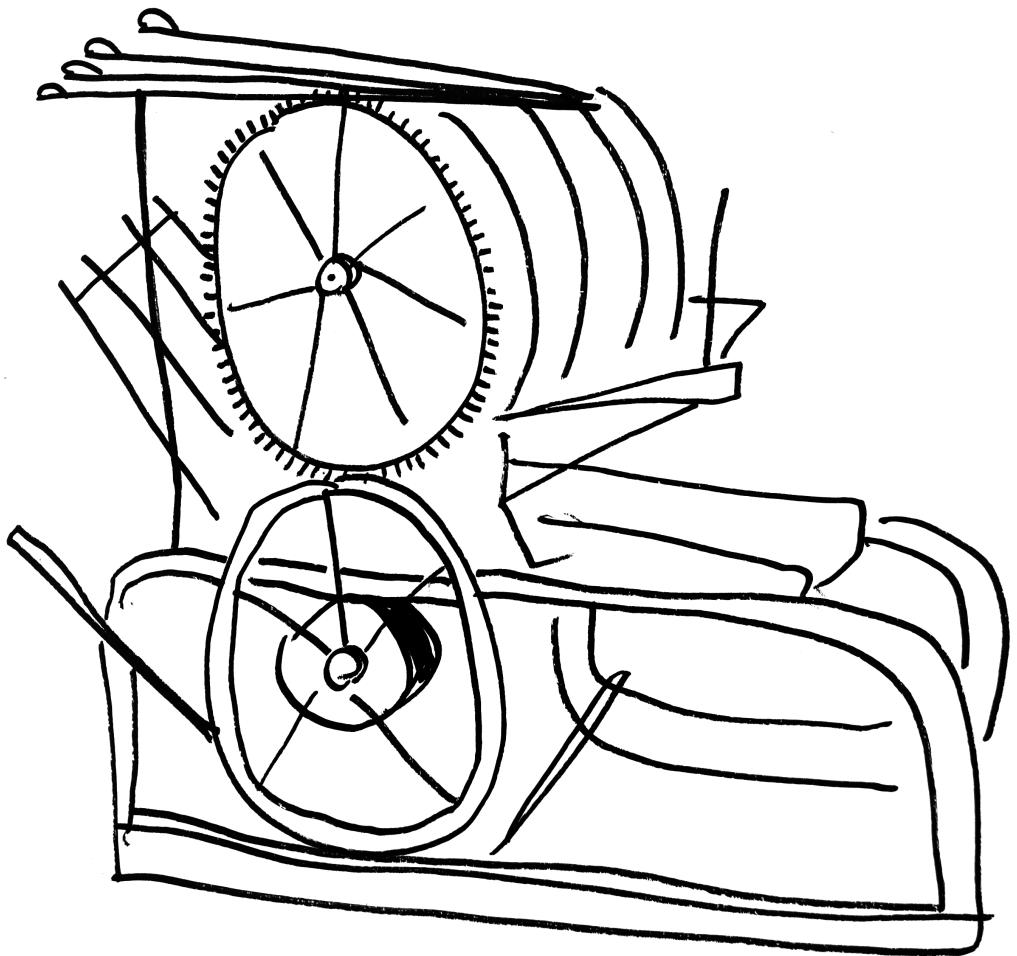
social media is are themselves a kind of social media. if they have an online version of their magazine then there's nothing that significantly separates them from other kinds of social media.

What about social media is different than more traditional forms of media?

Aside from its boundaries being vague, changing, and hard to define, social media is different from traditional media in a couple key facets.

One difference that comes to mind is it's decentralization. In the past, if you wanted to have the authority of a newspaper you needed to have a lot of resources at your disposal. You needed printers, you needed people to deliver your paper, these things were expensive.

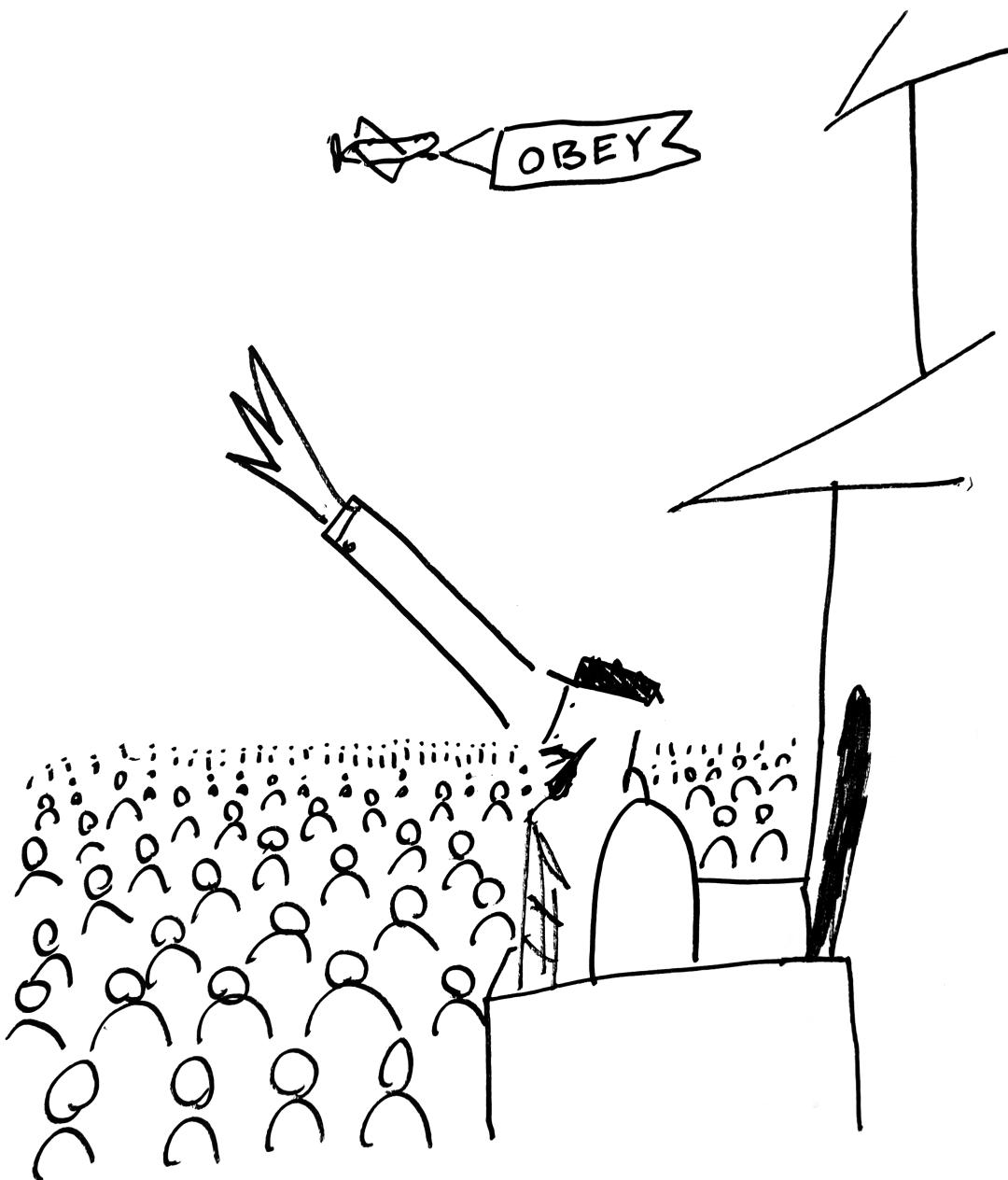
In the era of computers anyone can make a site that has the same level of authority as any other site. It would be pretty difficult and time-consuming and expensive to create a fake New York times newspaper in real life, but in the world of computers making a fake New York times website could happen in less than a day for no cost at all.



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Maybe the reason social media is so harmful is because anyone can say anything they want and have just as much authority as anyone else. Harmful actors look as legitimate as vetted news.

There may be some truth to this, but the effects of this should be mitigated by the nature of social media. Presumably, within the world of Facebook or Twitter or some other social media platform, the news that you are seeing is being shared by people who are your real-life friends. It is my friends then that are given the true agency in this situation over what I end up seeing. Perhaps on a global scale what's going on in my friends' life is not as important as what's being reported on in the New York times, but I care very much about the lives of the people that I'm friends with. Shouldn't the democratization of the media be a positive thing? If we lived in an authoritarian state where the media was controlled by a single governmental entity, wouldn't we assume this to be biased? Why would absolute centralization be bad but considerable degrees of decentralization also be bad?



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I don't believe the stupidity of my friends explains the spread of misinformation or the depressive state engaging with social media puts people in.

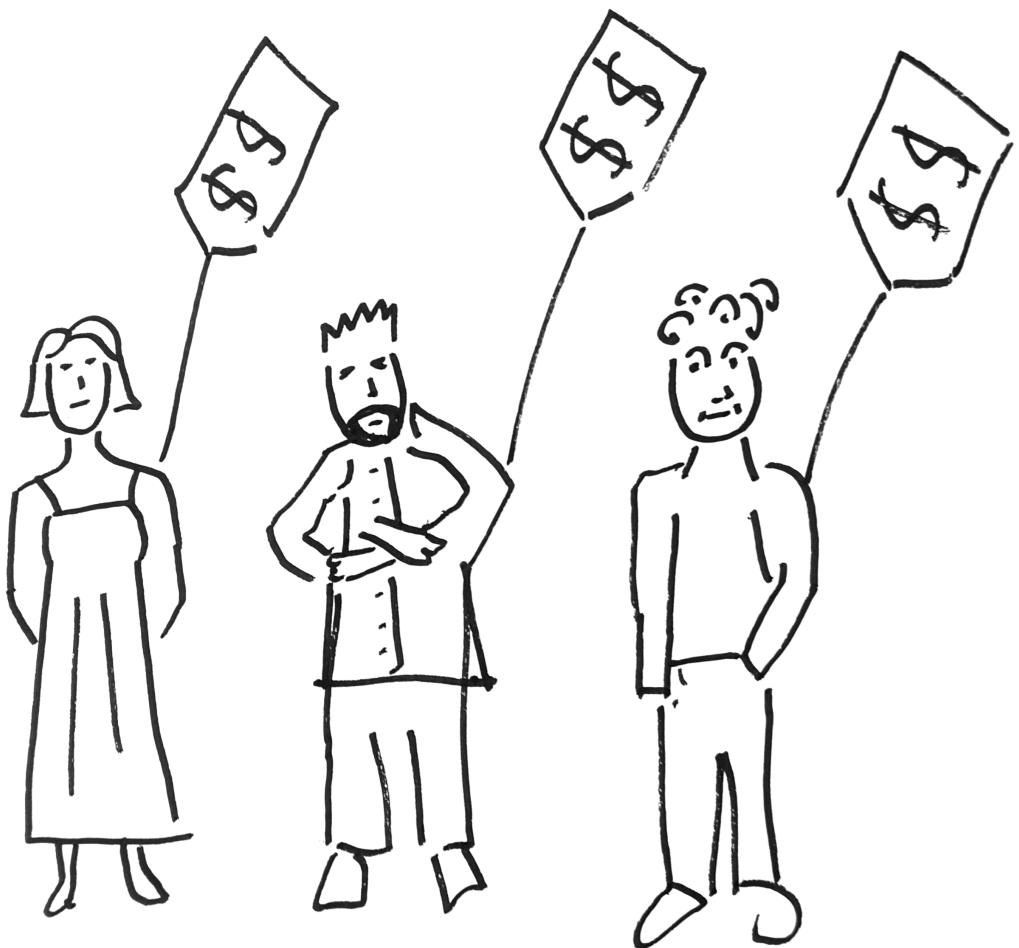
Follow the money

Another significant difference between traditional media and social media is the profit incentive. If you were to pay for a magazine subscription, you are the customer. The contents of the magazine is the thing being sold.

Facebook doesn't cost any money to use for anyone. That's because *you* are the thing being sold. Your attention is valuable and worth money to advertisers who pay Facebook and other social media platforms to have access to your attention.

This means social media platforms are incentivized to cultivate patterns of thoughts within their user base that is attractive to advertisers. If a social media platform can influence you and your way of being to be a better, more attractive advertising candidate, they will. That's their business model.

What does an attractive advertising candidate look like? to answer this question we only need to look



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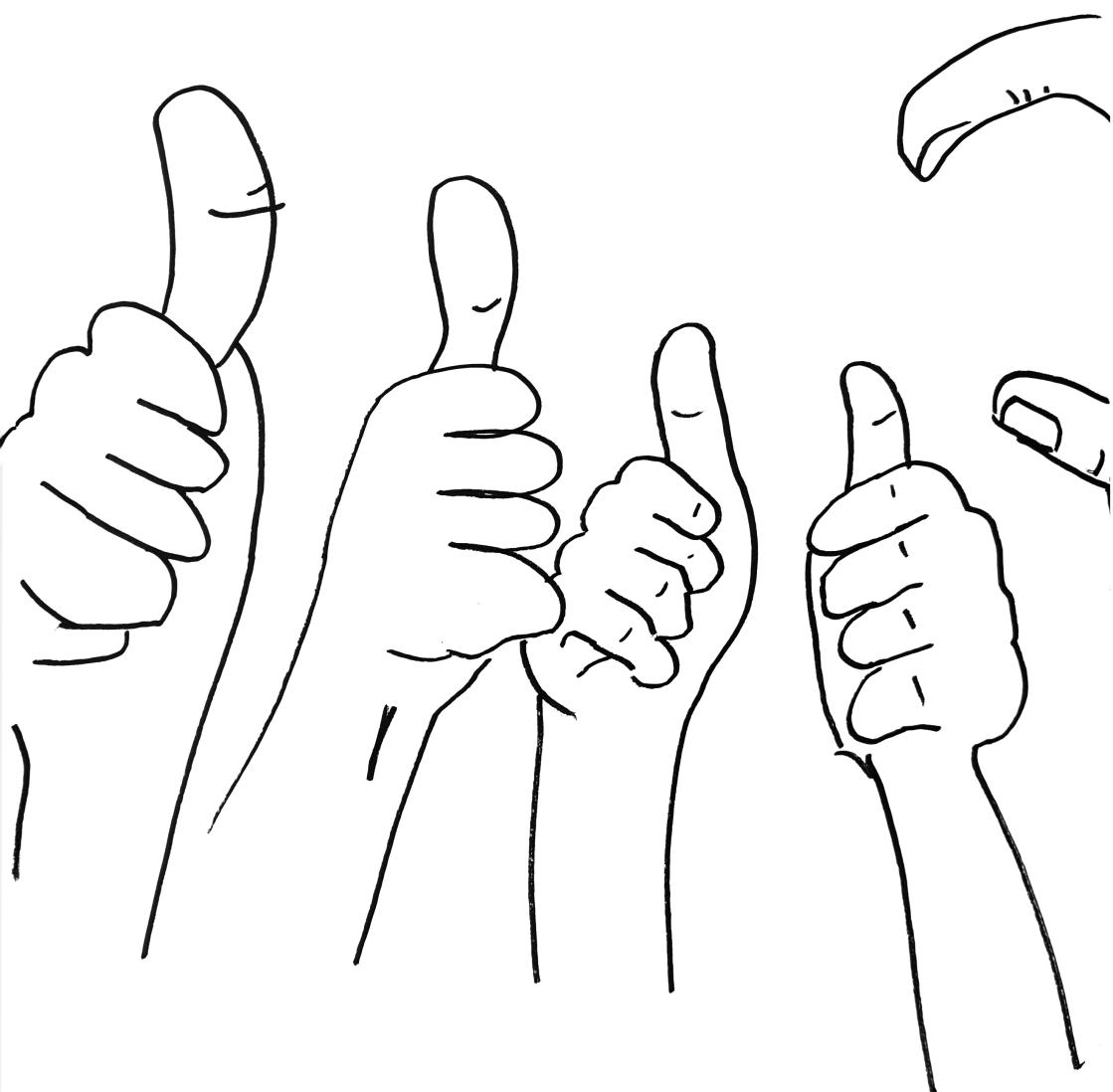
at the effects of social media. People who feel inadequate are more likely to buy stuff. (Abel)

Within social media platforms we work for the advertisers

The mechanics of social media platforms influence what kind of media we create and share. An easy example of this is that almost all social media platforms have some sort of quantified metric of engagement. Facebook posts show how many likes we got, Instagram photos show how many hearts we got, tweets show us how many hearts we got.

Does it really help me to know that 20 people liked a status I made on Facebook? No. That information doesn't tell me how deeply any of those people engage with what I'm saying. That information doesn't let me know how important or life-changing what I have to say is. It assigns a numerical value to something I made. Its value is based on how much attention it got from other people.

The mechanics of this encourage us to make content that is as engaging as possible. It doesn't matter how hard we work on what we make, it doesn't matter how honest what we're saying is, the only thing that



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matters is how many people engage with it. This isn't a goal that we set for ourselves. This is a goal that social media platforms set for us.

The people that learn to succeed at this goal are people who learn to perform a version of their life that is engaging. It's disingenuous. It's alienating.

This is one of the things I think Amalia Ulman's "excellences and perfections" is about. The mechanics of the social media platforms encourage the people who use them to construct an excellent and perfect version of their life. People's timelines become the repetition of the same lie over and over again. Everything is excellent, everything is perfect.

Eventually the facade will crack.



Eventually the facade will crack.

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