

Suning Yao

Introduction to Writing Workshop

15 Dec 2020

Fed by feed

The first line of our writing class manifesto is "In a world where we have not been given the opportunity to enjoy the camaraderie of meeting in person." I am a freshman at New York University, but I have never been to the campus or even New York due to the global epidemic. I live in a world where students have to take online courses in Zoom meetings. We no longer shuttle between classrooms or offices but spend a day of work sitting in front of a screen. After several months of courses, I still can't imagine that I have collaborated with my classmates on one project after another but have never seen them in person. This strange semester shifts most of my life onto the Internet, and maybe the only thing I do besides sleeping is taking courses completely on Zoom. However, how do I make this massive transition from the physical world to the online world? How do all the Internet technologies affect me?

Patrick Stokes, a lecturer in philosophy at Deakin University, in his 2013 essay "The Digital Soul," points out that " 'you' can refer to several different things, with different boundaries and locations" (Stokes). What he means is that the boundaries of the self are blurred and not necessarily limited to the physical human body. In the 1970s, the online self was probably just like a blanket draped over the human physical self in Dungeons and Dragons since it is played face to face with our physical identity. The online self was just a pointer to the physical self. However, social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, allows online identities to be "created, maintained, and manipulated in new ways" and "do not necessarily point to the physical self" (Henderson). The Internet, as a virtual world, gives us a space to develop our online identity

freely. Our online identities are growing, presumably much faster than the physical ones. Stokes describes that our online self is filtered close to our expected physical self's image. After our physical selves' death, our online selves fell into endless silence, but the online identity does not always depend on the physical identity, so such an immortal online identity is still growing like an inflating balloon in everyone's entire identity. It may not burst, but it will take up more space. It is unavoidable that our task is, Stokes includes, to learn to understand the interactions between a dozen different selves, mostly the online self. Stokes discusses the Internet's role and its effects on us from a philosophical view. While Stokes' essay mainly focuses on the philosophical afterlife brought by the online identity, Jia Tolentino, a staff writer for The New Yorker, presents her more practical and analytical insights reviewing the Internet's position and online self in our current life in her "The I in the Internet." Stokes's idea of the crucial online self can be fruitfully applied to what Tolentino examines in her essay. Tolentino's discussion aims at the current status of the relationship between the Internet and us at a practical level. She describes the Internet as "the central organ of contemporary life" and "rewired the brains of its users." Tolentino also points out that the Internet is "overloading us with much more sensory input than was ever possible in primitive times" (11). In her description, the Internet has been integrated into a part of the human body, as if it has become an organ that absorbs human nutrients like a parasite that brings additional burdens to people. The Internet has become the central organ of human physical personality. Tolentino also feels that "the internet would only ever induce this cycle of heartbreak and hardening a hyper engagement that would make less sense every day" (31). Our generation grew up with the existence of the Internet. We cannot imagine primitive life without the Internet or our cell phone. The Internet is growing and cannibalizing us, and we are more and more numb about that. The Internet's growth has no reasonable hope of stopping because it still

serves in "large part inextricable from life's pleasures." As an "extra organ," the Internet will unconsciously be rejected since we will not learn every newest technology and download every App. This is how we automatically respond to the Internet's expansion, just like "organ rejection." However, cases show that our natural defense fails against the vital need for the Internet without considering the consequences that may induce.

At the end of April, Zoom's daily conference participants have exceeded the 300 million mark, compared to the figure in January, which was only 10 million, a growth rate of 2900% ("Return on Zoom"). Behind the user count's incredible surge is the increase in the proportion of people using the Internet, especially major platforms like Zoom, to work or study. In 2020, individuals are attending virtual meetings due to the epidemic. Individuals no longer shuttle between classrooms or offices but spend a day of work sitting in front of a screen. Social distancing and masks may reduce our tendency to socialize, and it also makes us have to move most social interactions onto the Internet. All of this was unbelievable at the beginning of 2020, and now it is a normal status for us to rely on our online identity. For Tolentino, it might be a perfect example of how the Internet is cannibalizing us. In college, the only way I can meet other people may be to see their avatars blurred from time to time due to Internet fluctuations. Perhaps, only our online identity has met each other. It is just like in our afterlife, only the online identities are alive, and the physical identities are muted. The communication on Zoom may be only at the level of our online identity instead of our whole self. Although this may only be an individual case caused by the epidemic, we can still use this kind of performance to prove that perhaps living on the Internet will be our normal state in the future. Whether it is social media or online meeting software, we are opening up a newer, bigger world of online self.

Apart from Zoom, which may be based on "older" technologies, more magical technologies such as Augmented Reality are being developed. While people enjoy the joy and convenience brought by the Internet, they are also gradually adapting to their rapid development and accustomed to the Internet. As Stokes put it, "It is increasingly integrated into our fleshy, four-dimensional everyday lives". Someday in the future, when the Internet is sufficiently developed, we may be inseparable from it 24/7 because if we lose ourselves on the Internet, perhaps it will be as challenging to move forward as if we have lost sight in the real world. All in all, we are tethered to the Internet.

We really do not specifically know why we use the Internet this much, but we are greatly dependent on it. Our online self expands and grows mainly due to social needs. In many cases, the Internet does very frequently to discover more of our new needs. We don't know what we want, but they led us to have such a need. Whenever we download software or follow a content creator, we will pay attention to his subscription content from time to time. It captivates our minds so well that it may cause addiction ("How Youtube Addictive"). These contents are, of course, what people like, so these continuous contents bring positive feedback to people so that people have a higher probability of paying attention to new contents. People are always being shaped and also learning in operant conditioning. Our online identity is like a guinea pig in an experimental environment, continually pressing buttons to get more food. The Internet is our "inextricable life's pleasure," even though we are treated like an experiment subject on the Internet while the testers continue to determine what we will need. We are learning to be even more reliable on the Internet.

The key to why we are so hooked up to those contents is the algorithms behind the applications and websites. During the period we browse or swipe, learning is happening with the online

identity of us and the algorithms of the Internet, which may be called the feeder of the feeds.

These algorithms are lurking in media sites, shopping sites, video sites, and social media, hoping to serve you well and make you very happy after using their products. All this seems to be proper for the time being because the Internet's role is to serve people, but the facts are brutal.

"Everything is being cannibalized-not just goods and labor, but personality and relationships and attention" (Tolentino, 33). Internet companies are competing for users and want users to rely on their websites and feed so that you can notice ads in just a few seconds when you happily browse video sites or use social media. We are still willing to accept these feeds, maybe that we FOMO.

We must ensure the online self's existence and activity to have a glamorous self on the online platform. Stokes questions about our untrue social media appearance with a question, "How can a set of images on a computer screen be you?" Tolentino shares a similar opinion about the filtered online identity with Stokes and argues the less and less genuine part of our online identity that "truer self on the Internet was slipping away" (4). Nevertheless, the brutal truth is that the profile images must be us. We are still tethered to our online identity and the Internet, where it is sinking in. If we resist and don't accept these feeds, our online selves may starve and die, so we have no more options. Tolentino describes the freedom and benefits brought by the Internet "started to seem like something whose greatest potential lay in the realm of misuse" (8). The modern algorithm's nature is profit-seeking, so it cannot create a healthy and nutritious feed after all. An example can show how the algorithm traps us in the freedom of our whole entities. This year, besides the epidemic, the most widely known topic may be Tik Tok. Tik Tok turned out to take over many mobile phone screens. Its success mainly depends on the extremely excellent recommendation algorithm. It can see through your hobbies ingeniously and concealed, thus giving you tailor-made content. When you watch the video, you will always know that there

are thousands of exciting content waiting for you to watch after watching this video. Its single video time is concise, and when you don't like a video, all you need is just a swipe to tell the algorithm that you don't like the video. Everything looks flawless, but even though this algorithm is excellent, it cannot be close to reality. In reality, people will naturally discover their hobbies, but in Tik Tok, people's interests will continue to concentrate and shrink so that our online identity is trained and tethered. We should see what we want to see and what we do not want to see in real life. The algorithm decides for us not to see what we do not want to see. Why do we give our choice to the algorithm? With the algorithm's existence, individuals' online self will become narrow or even more extreme because of algorithms. For instance, if hungry, we tend to choose high-calorie and delicious fast food instead of buying food from markets, cooking, and washing dishes afterward. Our online self is always hungry. The feeds on these networks are like fast food. They are indeed delicious and fast, but they may not be so nutritious. Just like what Tolentino considers, the Internet is full of content that either "thinks different" or may turn people more extreme.

To return to the Zoom example, it seems everything brought by Zoom, such as more work-life balance and instant communications across miles, should be utterly positive without turning people more extreme that Tolentino asserts. However, Stokes's thought-provoking question "How can a set of images on a screen be you?" sheds insight on the problem of Zoom reducing the effectiveness of communication. This question points out that the seemingly efficient and convenient video chat has reduced many details in the physical identity's interpersonal communication, especially the expressions and eyes. As an essential medium for conveying emotions and feelings, these elements can complete communication in human society. "But those telling twitches all but disappear on pixelated video or, worse, are frozen, smoothed over or

delayed to preserve bandwidth." (Murphy) Even in the real world, we always try to pretend our true feelings and emotions. With the Internet, the leftovers of these vital parts of human interactions are at a minimal level. In this way, the network's function seems to be just a crude version of real life. The existence of the Internet allows our online selves to interact with each other. Yet, it has never been as efficient and complete as the interaction in reality, and it can even cause human emotional and psychological problems just like Zoom. Although Tolentino is right up to the point that some Internet platforms are filled with content about others' complaints, those platforms may somehow cause emotional problems, his overall claim that online identity is, still, giving us inextricable pleasure may not be entirely correct. A 2003 study on unregulated Internet usage among 465 college students indicates that depression and media habits formed to relieve depressive emotions are associated with Internet usage (Larose). Overall, the Internet is creative and delightful to use, but still, it is a dump of negativities and curses. Although the network strives to portray authenticity and has countless advantages, it has one disadvantage that is, after all, it is not "real." Our physical selves eat vegetables and meat from the farm, and our online selves eat online feeds. Our spiritual needs and social needs are the mouths of our online selves, eating greedily. Network vendors use our remaining time as a battlefield, grabbing our every minute and every second. Even if we are fed up with these feeds, they will use algorithms to force us to accept and earn us from our physical selves of money. Our online self is like this, moistened by the Internet, but also becoming addicted to feeds.

Friedrich Nietzsche thought that even the most spotless thing would be unbearable over time. Since its birth, the Internet has been developing so fast due to its open-source philosophy, neutrality, and freedom. It is initially built by enlightened and visionary engineers sharing and opening more worlds to everyone. In a snowstorm more than forty years ago, Randy Suess

invented BBS to allow people trapped at home to communicate with each other. (Delwiche) At that time, BBS was like a physical bulletin board, gathering people whispering to each other with the same hobbies. Concurrently, it solved the shortcomings of long-distance, small range, and slow updates of physical billboards, allowing people to experience the Internet's convenience. When you read this article, you may also lament the goodness of the Internet, like people who were imprisoned by the snow more than 40 years ago. In the age of BBS, people gather together for various interests to communicate. People's selves are now stripped and divided by apps, and people's online selves are forced to have many clones in different app communities. All People follow the algorithm brainlessly and are fed by feeds. These feeds seem to be professional, but how can these content producers know all our interests? How can the recommendation system fully understand our minds? Look back at the BBSs you often visit. Their backward and candid web pages may no longer exist, or no one cares about them anymore. The real reason may be that we are accustomed to being fed by recommended content, and we are no longer willing to build our real and realistic Internet self laboriously. The originality of our Internet self that is eager for new information and sharing may be forgone. The origin vision drives the Internet. The Internet already walked too far, down to where it had forgotten why it embarked.

The Internet promised us freedom at its birth. Then it potentially came to be laid in the realm of misuse. (Tolentino) The Internet self may become extreme and "bitchy" under the cultivation of these feeds. What can we do about the continuous growth of online identity and its addiction to feeds? Maybe it is too difficult for us to resist it, so we must understand its connection and relationship with our whole identity and manage its impact well. We should keep our vigilance while reducing our worries. We need just to sit back, relax, and enjoy the convenience and countless opportunities brought by the Internet because this will absolutely be the future. Online



identity may be our elephant in the room. We will not omit it, but of course, we should be careful our whole identity will not be stepped on by it.

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