**From World to the Screen and Back**

Chapter 1: **Missing the Point**

Today, we perceive social media as a mode of entertainment, but this was not always the case. In its early days, the World Wide Web was described as the ultimate abolishment of barriers in global communication. Utopic euphemisms such as the romantic "cyberspace" and unbounded "information highway" (Dreyfus, *On the Internet*) were used to articulate the end one of the biggest problems of a globalized world: Lack of communication. The Internet was not the first medium to make this claim. In the past, Enlightenment intellectuals praised the coffeehouse, the press, the radio and the television as a better-than-before *public sphere*, an environment in which individuals can engage in rational reflection with little limitations and refine human life through their reflections (Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere)*. Thus, such thinkers of the early ages of the Internet rejoiced at having created a platform in which all limitations of communication had finally disappeared. It seemed that finally, spatial and even temporal distances would cease to matter, and human beings would enjoy a sense of wholesome interconnectedness that is rivaled by no other age.

It is clear to most of us that this is not the case today. Social Media, the current main communicative tool of the Internet, seems to us mostly as a platform of entertainment. Modern tech-sociologists see it as a harmless medium of escapism at its best, and as an addictive tool that isolates, alienates, and socially damages its users at its worst (Turkle, *Alone Together*). Even though the cyber-utopians were correct about the technical possibilities of the Internet, these developments did not create the utopia they had aspired towards. On the other hand, the seeming advantage of unbounded global communication is undeniable. Then, where did the discrepancy between the true potential of the Internet and the aspirations it was built with go array?

Any time some thinkers laid out the utopia a tool of global communication could bring about, some critiques saw great danger in the ideal of levelling all communication. When the television seemed to have brought the abolition of all possibilities of distance, Heidegger pessimistically noted on its frustrating effects: "Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness. [Instead], everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness" (Heidegger, *The Thing*). It seemed to Heidegger that the TV would destroy the concept of distance completely, making it such that nothing is far, but nothing is close either. Instead, it would create a *distanceless* environment, in which all communication is equally easy, but also equally trivial.

  The early enthusiasts of social media imagined that the ease of communication it would eventually allow would bring human beings closer to one another, allow for more meaningful interactions between those who had previously no access to one another. Admittedly, social media has made social interaction infinitely more accessible, but while doing so, it reduced the significance of social interaction as well. In the end, the possibility of profound discussions between two individuals from two completely different paths of life found an ironic realization in a virtual platform where all such attempts are concealed by targeted ads, edited photos, and purposeless scrolling. Instead of making the world more accessible, Social Media became a virtual world of its own, in which all communication was trivialized as it was made possible.

  Then, the current moment is as such: Social Media has ceased to be a tool, an instrument that is meant to aid our lives, and is a self-sustaining world instead. It reveals all of its uses as *within the platform,* instead of as a tool that helps us *through the platform*. However, the early theorists were not mistaken about the limitations of Internet. There is nothing in its structure that inherently made it impossible for the platform to be an aid, rather than an end. If it is not the inherent structure, then it must be the *design* of the platform that destined Social Media to its current position. Admittedly, the design of the Social Media is itself a structure that is superimposed on the structure of the Internet. However, this structural design is nonetheless alterable, given that one can expose its shortcomings, and reveal the advantages of an alternative.

  The question of structural design is not an aesthetic concern but a structural one. To convey this idea, Marshall McLuhan writes: "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, *Understanding Media*). Any content within a medium cannot be separated from the structure of the medium. Similarly, for the case of social media, any interaction a user has with a social media platform cannot be separated from the design of the platform. Whether or not it is intentional, the design of the platform already nudges the user towards certain behaviors, encourages some interactions over others, and eventually has an undeniable influence over the totality of ways in which we use the platform.

  Furthermore, design not only refers to what is made possible and what is not; but also, to what is made easily accessible and what is not. Admittedly, perhaps the theoretically conscious and technically skilled user can make use of the full spectrum of the platform's possibilities, but most users will limit themselves to the uses that they see as clear and beneficial. It is the mission of the design of the platform to make clear to the user what uses cases are most beneficial, by centralizing these use cases. In phenomenology, one refers to the way in which an object's structure has an effect on how it is seen by the subject by using the phenomenon of revelation: "The platform *reveals itself* as such and such". What is meant by revealing is not that the platform shows, generates, or otherwise outputs any active message, but that through what it chooses to make easily available to the user, it encourages the user to see the platform in a certain way.

In conclusion, to unearth the potential of Social Media, one must establish the existing design choices that cause Social Media to reveal itself as an end in itself, as *a within-the-platform*, show the shortcomings and harmful effects of this way of revealing the platform. Finally, one must posit what kind of a design could reveal it as a tool, a *through-the-platform*, and how this design could enrich users' social lives.

  Today, we can barely recognize any of the potential of social media, given that it reveals itself as a platform of entertainment. However, even today, there are marginal practices in which the platform relates itself to the outside world, allowing us to get a glimpse of the *through-the-platform* experience. Most clearly, the platform allows one to strengthen or continue old personal connections or make new ones. It gives the user the ability to maintain relationships that have a bearing in real life from a distance. It can be used to create or empower genuine engagements, such as with a social group, a hobby or interest, or even a social movement (Tufekci, *Tear Gas and Twitter*). It has the capability of public announcement or otherwise global dissemination of important information, such as information intended to awaken one to others' circumstances to which one would not ordinarily have access. Furthermore, it allows one to explore new identities and new forms of interactions with a lower experimentation cost (Turkle, *Life on The Screen*). In the end, that platforms are more useful when they relate themselves to the outside world is known to some extent even by the platforms, such as Facebook's recent ad: "The best part of Facebook isn't on Facebook. It's when it helps us get together" (<https://www.facebook.com/facebook/posts/the-best-part-of-facebook-isnt-on-facebook-its-when-it-helps-us-get-together/10157603525701729/>) That being said, only some ways of enrichment are available to us today; we can only begin to uncover others once we explore an alternative design.

In the chapter to come, we will consider what design choices cause the platforms to reveal themselves *within-the-platform,* and show that not only do these design choices fail to uncover Social Media's potential, they also harm the user's social lives. First of all, we will explore how the technical capabilities of the platform often used against the user, in a way that does not mainly intend the "best" experience for the user, but works towards a definition of success that is not user-centered instead, such as the greatest number of clicks, maximum time spent in platform, etc. This causes the platform to be perceived as manipulative and untrustworthy, and therefore not to be taken seriously. If the user were not to feel that the platform was designed against him, he could trust it more and take his engagement with the platform more seriously. Then, use cases that transcended the trivial engagement *within-the-platform* would begin to appear. But currently, the platform wishes *not be taken seriously.*

  The features causing this mentality are those of "addictive design". These include the heavy-stimulus based design, notifications that intend to allure the user to go inside the platform rather than function as an alert for a significant "news", the continuous renewal of the platform which induces a *fear of missing out* and creates an "expectation of continuous connection" (Turkle, *Alone Together*)*,* and the *infinite scroll* that removes any possibility of a natural conclusion (Although recently, Instagram rolled out a "You are all caught up" feature, hopefully as a solution to this last problem) (<https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/07/02/introducing-youre-all-caught-up-in-feed/>).

Another way in which Social Media purposefully remains *within-the-platform* is by creating a distance between the individual as a real person and the user of a virtual platform; "distance-creating design". For example, the "profile" section as a whole encourages the user to construct a 'self' that can be managed through a reflexive distance, rather than a self that is immediate and without distance, thus differentiating the virtual persona from the real, and loosening the expectation that the activity in the virtual world somehow has an effect on the real world (Gershon, *Unfriend My Heart).* A concrete example of this differentiation is Instagram's built-in editing features. Similarly, the vastness of the platform, although sometimes presented as a feature, impedes on the user's ability to get into any personal relation via the platform. The universalized Sartrian gaze pushes the user to pretend, and hampers the possibility of a genuine engagement that one can more easily feel in a local environment. Once again, this puts a distance between the user during his engagement with the virtual world, and his existence in the world. Indeed, this distance is so large that it has led to the organic development of the concept of a *finsta,* an Instagram account in which one can be authentic, "be one's self", thanks to the security of the hiddenness from the public, and only visibility to a group of people that the user has intentionally picked (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/instagram-finsta-rinsta-ramona-pringle-1.4279550>).

Finally, there are features relating to a "minimal-engagement design", in which the platform encourages the user to engage with any post, user or part of the platform in a *bare minimum*. For example, the main form of engagement is scrolling through a *home page* made up of discontinuous *posts*, while minimally engaging with each post for a short amount of time, such as liking, commenting or sharing. None of these features requires a reflective engagement or any commitment, or translate in any way to the world outside of it. The discontinuousness causes the "prevention of a connected stream of conscious thought", which hampers the user's ability to transcend the platform. Instead, the user is encouraged to jump to the next post, so that at the end of the experience, one does not "remember" any particular thing (McLuhan). Similarly, the platform feels chaotic and foreign, forcing a restricted engagement that happens on the platform's terms, rather than allowing the freedom for the user to engage on her own terms. Targeted ads that are mysterious to the user (Tufekci, *We're Building a Dystopia just to Make People Click on Ads*), and the curation of feeds (home feed, recommended videos, recommended friends, etc.) through an algorithm that is unknown to a user function in this way. The user is only allowed a second-order control over the curation by his previous activity. Furthermore, this curation often leads to content linked with extremism (Tufekci) and confines the user to a sphere determined by her previous activities. Negatively, the platform gives the user no way of controlling the algorithm through which the feed is curated. Therefore, the platform is depowering, hence forcing the user to treat it as mere entertainment or a virtual pass-time.

  After enumerating the design choices that have brought Social Media to its current state, in Chapter 3, we will discuss ways of altering the design so that Social Media reveals itself as a *through-the-platform* tool, and show how this could enrich the users' lives in a way that is not possible today.