

Against social media

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Among the many conventional practices of which a modern person may participate, the use of social media presents two characteristics which are relatively peculiar. The first is that people are typically not uninclined to question it. The second is that, though certainly embraced by most, it is also typically recognized *at least* as problematic.

It would be rushed to deduce from this that convincing people to abandon social media is easier than, say, convincing them that free love is preferable to monogamy. Contrarily, the fact that people usually recognize the evils of social media usage and yet fail to abstain from it indicates how deeply pervaded and needful of it they have become. In this, and in many other ways, the use of social media resembles more the epidemic emergence of an addictive substance than merely a conventional practice.

Here, I do not understand social media as an abstraction or as something that is *in principle* pernicious. I am rather speaking of social media networks as designed and implemented by mega-corporations such as Meta and X Corp. The social media networks owned by these companies compress *by far* the great majority of social media usage, so it is a useful simplification to speak of their use with the more general phrase *social media usage*.

To begin with, social media networks possess all the typical evils of technology as delivered by Silicon Valley's mega-corporations. Most of these are public knowledge and [many descriptions](<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26609097>) of them exist. These technologies not only foster tyranny but are tyrannical themselves. A person scrolling through social media is constantly subjected to stimuli it has never chosen, needed, and perhaps even wanted. What is more, it is not only turned into a product, but also into an experimental subject. Every interaction with the platform is used as information to more precisely exploit their weaknesses, sophisticating the mechanisms designed to capture their attention. This is what is euphemistically called «personalizing user experience».

Changes to the network's settings are designed to provide the illusion of control, and it is hard not to imagine, when considering their range of possibilities, a slave

which is free to choose the color of its clothes or a prisoner free to change its cell's wallpaper patterns. The reason why any sort of control is illusory is because these networks consist *by design* in platforms of surrendering personal information. This means that using them in a way that discloses no personal data defeats their very purpose and is thus not likely to occur. Herein lies the irony: though data is sometimes stolen without permission, this, in most cases, is unnecessarily violent. It suffices to *seduce* people into giving away their information.

The means of this seduction are the eternal flaws and tragedies of human nature. Vanity, a desire to be seen, loneliness, greed, the longing for a sense of community: all these are exploited so as to convince people to surrender themselves into a distant, almost absolutely abstract master. In return for your public and, more often than not, also private life—in exchange for accepting to be bombarded by targeted advertising—in appreciation for displaying each and every one of your softest spots, so that they may be used against you, you are given spiritual pennies. The illusion of connection, stupid and ephemeral content so that you may forget yourself for a while, and the miserable joy of being seen. This is the Promethean exchange which the article I cited above describes, where you get «gifts of enlightenment and ease in exchange for some measure of awe, gratitude, and deference to the technocratic elite that manufactures them».

Any structure of power which bases itself in tyranny, and whose subsistence depends on fostering the lesser side of human nature, is repugnant and vile. Instead of widening the horizons of human expression, social media networks narrow our points of view, radicalize us into smaller and smaller communities of like-minded individuals, and make us forget the human touch. Could better social networks exist? Are these in principle flawed?

As is usually case with technology, social networks when considered generally are morally neutral. It is their capitalist design what perverts them. There are social media networks that are (*a*) not centrally owned by any private or state entity and (*b*) which does not subject their users to any form of tyranny. It goes without saying that the satisfaction of (*b*) requires the satisfaction of all the conditions that make a software free (as in *libre*, not as in *gratis*). [Mastodon]([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mastodon_\(social_network\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mastodon_(social_network)))

is a famous such type of network. Security concerns have been raised, since decentralization induces particular problems, but speaking broadly these concerns may be compensated by the fact that, by design, these networks do not require their users to provide personal information.

As is typically the case, these decentralized endeavors lack the features provided by technological giants, whose extraordinary economical power allows them to surpass all competition in what comes to the «quality» of their products. This of course assumes that «quality» is unconcerned with freedom and ethics, which is not indisputable. Whatever the case, in general, people do not care enough so as to endure great discomfort so as to utilize a purely free software. I include myself

in this description: like everyone else, and though I've tried to minimize it, my computer runs a great deal of proprietary programs.