

Against social media

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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*.

Among modern conventional practices, the use of social media presents two characteristics which, both taken together as well as separately, are somewhat peculiar. The first is that people are typically not uninclined to question it, with many even recognizing it as superficial or even pernicious. The second is that, despite being widely recognized at least as problematic, people find it almost unthinkable to abstain from it, and even consider those who do so to be eccentric at best, perhaps even suspicious.

One would not expect the abstention from social media platforms to be so rare, since these are so frequently challenged. To take a single example, TikTok is under constant scrutiny by government and human rights organizations. The European Comission found it to have an addictive design and promote compulsive behavior [1], and the Algorithmic Transparency Institute, in collaboration with Amnesty International's digital forensics team, showed how TikTok amplifies harmful and even suicidal content to adolescent users [2]. Beyond official inquiries, public opinion is open to accepting that the network raises significant concerns. And this dual scrutiny, running from public opinion and from official institutions, applies to all major social media platforms.

However, in my experience, persuading people of abandoning social media, or getting them to consider this as a viable alternative, is extraordinarily difficult. From non-monogamy and anarchism to ufology and anti-vaccine rhetoric, almost any fringe belief system—be it rational or irrational, fact-based or supersti-

tious—encounters less social friction than the simple act of abstaining from social media. The fact that people usually recognize the evils of social media usage and yet are so reluctant to even consider abstaining 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.

Social media networks possess all the typical evils of technology as delivered by Silicon Valley's mega-corporations, which are public knowledge [3]. On one hand, though people tend to believe advertisement to be a filling that interrupts or is in-between the content, the exact opposite is the case: advertisement *is* the content, whatever else is simply there to capture our attention. Furthermore, aside from fostering tyranny, these platforms are tyrannical themselves. A person scrolling through social media is constantly subjected to stimuli they never chose, needed, and perhaps even wanted. Lastly, people are not only turned into a product in the form ad consumers, but also into an object of constant surveillance. Every interaction with the platform is used as information to more precisely exploit their softer underbelly, sophisticating the mechanisms designed to keep their attention captive. This is what is euphemistically called «personalizing user experience».

These networks are designed to provide the illusion of control. A certain degree of customization is allowed, and some privacy settings exist. However, (a) the proprietary nature of these networks makes it impossible to verify how privacy is in fact protected, and (b) these settings are typically limited—as famously shown by Facebook's policy of keeping data even from deleted accounts. Here, the user is put in a position analogous to that of a slave which is free to choose the color of his clothes or a prisoner free to change his cell's wallpaper patterns.

It should be clear that this is a matter of necessity: due to the very nature of these platforms, any form of user control **must** be illusory. The surrendering of one's identity to public and private scrutiny is part of their fundamental design. This means that any use of them which discloses no personal data defeats its very purpose and is thus not likely to occur. The strategy of these networks is therefore to avoid unnecessary violence: instead of stealing data, they aim at **seducing** people into giving away their information, an art which they have mastered to perfection.

The means of this seduction are the eternal flaws and miseries of us all. Vanity, a desire to be seen, loneliness, greed, the longing for a sense of community or belonging: 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 interchange upon which social networks are founded: you get «gifts of enlightenment and ease in exchange for some measure of awe, gratitude, and deference to the technocratic elite that manufactures them» [3].

Any structure of power which bases itself in tyranny, and whose subsistence depends on fostering the lesser side of human condition, 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? As is usually the 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 not centrally owned by any private or state entity and which do not subject their users to any form of control or surveillance. It goes without saying that the latter condition requires the satisfaction of all others that make a software free (as in *libre*, not as in *gratis*). Mastodon is a famous such type of network, but even this one is a *niche*. Are these solutions to the issues raised above?

The answer is yes and no. On one hand, decentralized and free social networks are not tyrannical by design, and thus do not possess the inherent evils of networks such as X or Instagram. However, they do not elude the problems of lack of substance, induction of compulsive behavior, and superficiality. In comparison with tyranny and surveillance, these issues are minor, but it must still be asked: what purpose does a social network account serve, even assuming it doesn't violate your freedom?

Most people, I think dishonestly, answer that social networks serve the purpose of keeping them informed. We pay little attention to how profoundly sad this statement is. The hidden assumption of such statement is that we are too lazy or unconcerned to actively seek information ourselves, perhaps through more substantial means. On the contrary, we prefer to be spoon-fed with offensively small, simplified chunks of information, which may certainly contain a link to more substantial articles, but which in all honesty we are unlikely to read. Furthermore, the propaganda model (as described by Chomsky and Herman) is essentially unaffected by social networks, insofar as these are platforms for news outlets to disseminate their content, without the networks producing news themselves. So it should be needless to explain, at least to those familiar with the model, how profoundly corrupt the attitude of informing oneself through social media is.

In any case, I do not think people seriously believe that social media is a source of information. I rather suppose that this is a more or less socially acceptable justification for using them. The real reasons, I believe, are more superficial. They draw our minds away from real life. We all seem to have a profound desire, perhaps even a need, to be distracted. This is an urge that perhaps should not always be resisted, but certainly should be well directed. I have nothing against leisure and distraction **per se**, and in fact I am a terribly lazy and disperse individual. What is more, I believe people should have even more spare time than contemporary society allows for. As Jung put it, we are a question addressed to the world, and we are to produce an answer lest the world produce one for us. Our spare time is the opportunity we have to connect with the creative, enriching facets of our own personal life, as well as the time we have to connect with each other. Thus, it is clear that the problem is not that we wish to be distracted, but where do we direct our distraction. Since social media networks are by design addictive and inducing of compulsive behavior, it is no surprise that most people waste their leisure scrolling. They should feel every such minute as a **theft**, for no instant of our life ever returns.

We underestimate how profoundly promising boredom is. The opportunity to be bored is indeed a privilege. It is when we are bored that we feel inclined to seek more rewarding experiences from life. The compulsion induced by social networks of course exploits this natural inclination by providing us a rapid, albeit shallow satisfaction. It is when I am bored that I decide to read, that I decide to learn a music sheet, that I decide to write, that I decide to spend time with a lover or a friend. Assuming a decent standard of living, life is never short of opportunities to explore creative, intellectual or affective satisfaction. Boredom is the catalyst that triggers our pursuit of them.

Yet less and less we are able to endure boredom, and the quality of our lives degrades in proportion. The shallow, rapid satisfaction which social networks provide, in depriving us from the opportunity to learn, to explore and to grow—in robbing us of our spare time, I mean—produces intellectual and moral stagnation. I do not claim it makes us more stupid—though an argument can be made—but at least it leaves us equally ignorant as before and hinders our potential. The use of social media is perhaps not a root cause of superficiality—be it intellectual or moral—but it certainly is a factor that not only makes it more permanent, but also tinges it with a rather distinctive tone.

What is there to be done? The answer is so simple that I am amazed it's not generally followed. We should abstain from using social media in any significant way. This could be understood as a boycott, but I view it simply as an abstention to partake in a practice that is tyrannical at worst, superficial and stupefying at

best. We must only come to a simple, straightforward realization: we do not need social media. At least assuming you don't depend on them professionally, there is no need they satisfy which cannot be satisfied in a more healthy, meaningful and enriching way. We should learn to embrace boredom precisely as what it is: a precious and delightful opportunity—and we should vindicate a form of human relations more sincere and honest than that which is practised in social media.

[1]https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26312[2]<https://www.amnesty.org/en-risks-pushes-children-towards-harmful-content/>[3]<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2660>