

**Social Media and the Loss of Shared Reality**

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Social media's impact on human society is undeniable. We use it compulsively; it's frequently characterized colloquially and, in some cases, formally, as an addiction. More and more of our interactions take place through various social media platforms, shaping the ways we view and navigate the world. As a result, the physical spaces that have been used as forums to share ideas—public realms—have receded, even disappearing altogether in some cases, taking with them the sense of shared reality among people. This lack of connection and understanding damages our ability to connect to one another and brings to light the very real consequences of this loss.

The internet was introduced to the world in a blaze of optimism, touting the promise of human connection across the globe. Social media was poised to be the ultimate version of the public realm that Hannah Arendt describes in *The Human Condition* (1958). She conceives of the public realm as a table, "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time." (Arendt, 1958, 52). We can express ourselves around this table. Here, we talk about our similarities, our differences, the things about which we may agree or disagree.

Arendt (1958) argues that public spaces not only serve as a venue to express oneself but are "...the proper place for human excellence." (49). She writes, "Excellence itself...has always been assigned to the public realm where one could excel, could distinguish oneself from all others." (Arendt, 1958, 48-49). It is in these public realms, on social media, that we present the best of ourselves; not necessarily an inauthentic version of ourselves, but a version filtered for excellence. "...with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world..." (Arendt, 1958, 176) and then present the proof of it on social media in a curated, dramatized fashion.

...the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and 'reified' only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, 'to act') indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting...this is also why the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others. (Arendt, 1958, 187-188)

In her collection of essays, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion*, Jia Tolentino (2019) reorients this notion for the age of the internet. She writes, "...you can't just walk around and be visible on the internet—for anyone to see you, you have to *act*. You have to communicate in order to maintain an internet presence." (8). Social media was built to pander to this desire to perform individuality; to demonstrate excellence. It was designed to be the ultimate public realm.

It would be far less satisfying to present excellence in private. Arendt's (1958) conception of performing excellence, by definition, necessitates an audience (49). To excel and distinguish oneself requires comparison. On social media, we find an unending audience for our excellence. It is a place for expression, somewhere we can contextualize ourselves, perform excellence, and receive validation for our performances.

The newness of social media drew nearly everyone to it, leaving behind those loyal to "real" human connection in physical spaces. But as the physical public realm shrank and social media grew, the diversity of thought that Arendt requires of a true public realm moved from the physical to the digital. The public took up residence on social media, and the physical public realm became nothing more than a relatively homogeneous collection of those who did not—or would not—see a space for themselves on digital platforms.

This ultimate public realm quickly became the dominant public realm. In the same way that a venture capital-backed coffee shop drives out all of the independent coffee shops in the neighborhood because the quality of the coffee is high and the prices are low, social media made maintaining local, physical public realms seem like a waste of time. Why bother paying \$7 for a latte from the little indie coffee shop when you can get a similar coffee from Blank Street in a trendy green cup for half the price?

Through social media, our connections can reach far beyond those in our immediate vicinity. Like a true Arendt-ian public realm, "...everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity." (Arendt, 1958, 50). We can learn about the movements of world leaders with the same immediacy as we can share the day's horoscope with a friend in another city. The advent of social media brought to fruition the global village that theorists in media, economics, and philosophy have been discussing for decades.

But, we have also become increasingly infatuated with our curated selves on social media. Constructing ourselves for social media satisfies an innate compulsion:

...even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. (Arendt, 1958, 50)

We crave the validation of being seen and heard, but this desire is not a recent development for humanity. Arendt was writing about this in 1958, well before social media, and Tolentino points out that this desire to tell the story of our lives can be traced all the way back to *The Odyssey*. It is in the telling of *The Odyssey* that "...the hero suddenly becomes aware not just of his own story but also of his own *need to be narrated*." (Tolentino, 2019, 125). It is the audience, "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear [that] assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves..." (Arendt, 1958, 50). It helps us understand our own story because

“Identity, according to [Adriana] Cavarero, is not something that we innately possess and reveal, but something we understand through narratives...” (Tolentino, 2019, 124-125).

We have been driven to social media by the need to narrate ourselves and receive validation for the performances of our own stories, and we stay on social media because, as Tolentino (2019) writes, “Online reward mechanisms beg to substitute for offline ones, and then overtake them.” (8). To be validated by the ten friends that you have at school, or the thirty people you see in your office is nothing when compared to the seemingly infinite audience of the global public. “Online, your audience can hypothetically keep expanding forever, and the performance never has to end.” (Tolentino, 2019, 15).

Social media was being offered to us for free, but it doesn’t exist for free. Huge swaths of software engineers, product managers, designers, and business people have built up and continue to maintain these platforms, and they need to be compensated for their work. We are living under capitalism, after all!

Social media companies had human attention in excess, so it was the natural commodity to monetize. Previous generations of media executives had already built a highly successful business model for monetizing attention; social media companies simply had to tailor it to their own needs. Soon, advertisements began to permeate social media feeds. But, companies under capitalism must demonstrate incessant growth which, for the social media advertising model, meant ever-increasing attention and active engagement from their users. Enter: The Algorithm.

Perhaps it was proposed by a psychologist, or perhaps it was simply learned by trial and error, but either way social media companies learned that their users were not likely to engage with content that made them feel merely neutral. People would engage most fervently with content that they loved and, sometimes, content they deeply hated.

What initially began as a relatively benign customization of what we saw on social media, became “...a situation where we—first as individuals, and then inevitably as a collective—[were] unable to exercise any control at all.” (Tolentino, 2019, 30). Recommendation algorithms started to construct bespoke social media feeds for us, populating them with content that would push our emotions to extreme pleasure or extreme displeasure, keeping us engaged on the platform.

The introduction of The Algorithm caused social media to evolve into something different. We were still telling the stories of our lives, still performing excellence, and the innate desire for validation still propelled us. But, The Algorithm ensures that we receive the validation we crave by surrounding us with people who are like us, who validate us simply because we are like them. The continual pursuit of this validation, in turn, drives engagement, fulfilling the needs of both the user and the platform. This insatiable desire inherently drives the success of these companies—the more validation its users receive, the longer they stay engaged, and the more advertisements they consume; over and over again in an endless cycle.

The Algorithm does not push users to understand a broad range of perspectives, it does not even attempt to ensure that what they see is real. It simply pursues attention and engagement, trapping social media users in ideological echo-chambers, and it worked. It still does. “The system persists because it is profitable.” (Tolentino, 2019, 14).

“The presentation of self [metastasizes] into a wreck...the [algorithm] adds a host of other, nightmarish metaphorical structures: the mirror, the echo, the panopticon.” (Tolentino, 2019, 14). We cease to see reasonable disagreement and the exchange of perspectives grinds to a halt. The Algorithm surrounds us with mirrors and, like Narcissus, we can’t tear ourselves away.

On social media, we can shape our performance to convey the excellence that we desire and that our audience loves; and if we stay long enough, these digital spaces become more real to us than whatever we experience in the physical world. We are giving the endless performance that Tolentino described, and in the endlessness it becomes everything.

Jean Baudrillard (2007) argues in *Forget Foucault*, however, that performance without exchange will always be artificial. Arendt’s (1958) conception of the public realm “...relates and separates men at the same time.” (52). The public realm necessarily contains an exchange of different perspectives; both a relation *and* a separation. By Baudrillard’s definition, it is real.

But social media under The Algorithm became nothing more than relation. Separation is lost, and with it, the exchange of perspectives. According to Baudrillard (2007), “...if [something] cannot be exchanged in this sense, it simply disappears.” (52). Without the exchange of perspectives, the public realm that was once social media begins to crumble.

Baudrillard (2007) writes, “When power blends into desire and desire blends into power, let’s forget them both.” (36). I posit that the integration of The Algorithm into social media—into our public realm—blended the public realm with desire and desire into the public realm. We witness this in the way that it now shamelessly panders to our unquenchable thirst for validation. Introducing The Algorithm, the mirror, the pursuit of engagement at all costs “...hypostatizes [it] and buries [it] in their theoretical project.” (Baudrillard, 2007, 32).

Social media has been reduced to silos full of funhouse mirrors and “...it dies at the hands of that infatuation with itself...it dies as well when it fails to recognize itself as a void, or as something reversible in death.” (Baudrillard, 2007, 64). Social media as a public realm “...no longer succeeds in producing the real, in reproducing itself as real, or in opening new spaces to the reality principle...” (Baudrillard, 2007, 45). Under The Algorithm, our once ultimate public realm has sublimated into Baudrillard’s hyperreal. Our sense of reality hinges on the interchange of manifold experiences, and without such, we become subsumed by false and distorted reflections of our own thoughts.

Tolentino recognizes this too. She writes that social media “...is engineered for this sort of misrepresentation; it’s designed to encourage us to create certain impressions rather than allowing these impressions to arise [from action]...” (Tolentino, 2019, 19). There is a difference between “...doing something and expressing the doing of something, between feeling something and conveying a feeling.” (Tolentino, 2019, 19). Social media blurs that. To express doing something on social media results in more validation than actually doing it in the physical world. Why not just post an expression of doing something on social media and avoid wasting your time doing it altogether?

It is not just the things we convey on social media that aren’t quite real, it’s also what we feel via social media that isn’t really what was once promised to us. “...social media is mostly unsatisfying. That is what keeps us scrolling, scrolling, pressing our lever over and over in the hopes of getting some fleeting sensation—some momentary rush of recognition, flattery, or rage.” (Tolentino, 2019, 30). In our ceaseless scrolling and search for validation, we confuse these momentary approximations of validation for the human connection we’ve largely left behind.

Our curated social media feeds are showing each of us a version of reality that we already know, understand, and believe in. Social media “...has taken what used to be the kind of global square...and fragmented it...” (Thompson, 2023) placing each of us in a space containing only exactly what is comfortable for us. In the hyperreality of social media, Hannah Arendt’s (1958) table disappears.

Only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense. Without it, we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality. (*xni*)

The public realm and a shared sense of reality are integral parts of sharing the world and seeing the world outside of your own selfhood. But now the “... experiences that we’re having on the Internet are siloed, and it’s making it...a lot more difficult to even talk about, you know, reality and consensus...” (Thompson, 2023). Rather than seeing the whole of reality and constructing a shared common sense, as Arendt envisioned, “The everyday madness perpetuated by the internet...positions personal identity as the center of the universe.” (Tolentino, 2019, 14)

But even under these conditions—lacking a shared reality and unable, or unwilling, to look outside of ourselves—we still share a world. We share governments and resources and physical space. The disappearance of shared reality has left the extent to which we share the physical world utterly, painfully, unchanged. As we are driven further into ourselves within the hyperreal world of social media, we become less and less capable of doing anything as a collective because we are so wrapped up “...figuring out the precisely correct way of explaining our lives.” (Tolentino, 2019, 17).

“If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men.” (Arendt, 1958, p. 55). It remains to be seen how long social media in its current form will be with us. Right now it is far too profitable a venture for tech companies to unceremoniously abandon, regardless of the havoc it wreaks on our shared world. It’s possible that regulations will eat away at some of that profitability over time. Until then, it is on each of us, the individuals, to drag ourselves away from the mirror and open ourselves to a collective that is uncomfortable, challenging, and different. As Hannah Arendt (1958) so eloquently puts it, “What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.” (52-53). It falls to the collective to rebuild a true public realm, whether it be digital or otherwise, to regain sincere exchange of thought and break out of the cultural echo-chambers we find ourselves in today.

## References

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