

NAVIGATING



INFORMATION FATIGUE

MAY 20, 2021: SOCIAL MEDIA & ME (ADDICTION BY DESIGN)



FREE TO THE PEOPLE

Social Media and Me (Addiction by Design)

The Social Dilemma—one example of a number of documentaries about these issues. The COVID-19 pandemic put us online a lot, and now it's winding down...but...

- a) we were already online A LOT
- b) it's going to be hard to go back

Last week we talked about the politics of social media a bit. The big takeaway is about how it pushes us into “filter bubbles,” that is, it breaks us into these self-reinforcing little communities where we don't have to hear about things that we don't like. The result is that it confirms our beliefs, and that it makes interpersonal relationships even harder. If you're a huge nerd like me, you might say we're in different “epistemic communities,” but all that means is that we literally don't “know” the same things—we're not exposed to the same information.

Our discussion today isn't “social media bad,” or even “social media bad because COVID.” It also helped to spread health information, give people outlets, etc.—one Chinese study demonstrates that: Bu Zhong et al, Mental health toll from the coronavirus: Social media usage reveals Wuhan residents' depression and secondary trauma in the COVID-19 outbreak, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106524](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106524)

But even studies that show it can be positive, like the one I just referenced, caution against overuse, and social media also accelerates *disinformation* and *misinformation*, which we will talk about more in the other presentation in this series next week.

One digital marketing website reported about 4 billion social media users worldwide, with Americans using social media on average about 2 hours a day...before the pandemic.

BUT, we are terrible at self-reporting, which is where these numbers come from: the higher the use, the less accurate the reports, and people are very bad judges of how much time they spend online (or, at least bad reporters):

- Theo Araujo, Anke Wonneberger, Peter Neijens & Claes de Vreese (2017) How Much Time Do You Spend Online? Understanding and Improving the Accuracy of Self-Reported Measures of Internet Use, *Communication Methods and Measures*, 11:3, 173-190, DOI: [10.1080/19312458.2017.1317337](https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2017.1317337)
- Verbeij, T., Pouwels, J., Beyens, I., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2021, January 5). The Accuracy and Validity of Self-Reported Social Media Use Measures Among Adolescents. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/p4yb2>
- People more potentially affected—w/trait neuroticism—also misreport (over report)
 - Bowden-Green, T., Hinds, J., & Joinson, A. (2021). Understanding neuroticism and social media: A systematic review. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 168, [110344]. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110344>

STILL, we spend a godawful amount of time on social media. Why, and does it matter?

To think about these questions, I want to talk a little bit about Las Vegas.

- Natasha Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, 2012
- Move away from “social” gambling, like being around a card table, roulette wheel—if you remade Casino Royale today, Mr. Bond would be sitting in front of a slot machine wearing a diaper for 20 hours
- I’m serious about the diaper thing, as reported by casino workers
- Mechanical rhythm, “machine zone” as Schüll reports—the goal is to keep playing, not necessarily to win
- Anecdotal evidence on PokerStars in PA about emotional regulation
- But if they don’t like it, why do they do it?
- Markets and users; repetition compulsion (McGowan, enjoying what we don’t have; Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*)

How is social media like that gambling technology?

- Bright colors, movement, visual attraction
- Positive reinforcement with notifications (and also threats: did I just get canceled?) – these are “intermittent” or “variable” rewards – they’re unpredictable, which is why they work—even fake bubbles and loading screens (Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 2016)
- Solitary sense of connection (you’re alone, but also doing lots of “social” things—reciprocity through liking, participating in “friends” lives etc, competing— “how many people like my post” and deleting, which my students say they do) (and Griffiths)
- Infinite scrolling—images you can only see part of, “pull to refresh” like a slot machine—and no breaks
- Tristan Harris, center for humane technology—people behind *The Social Dilemma*—congressional testimony, <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/96E3A739-DC8D-45F1-87D7-EC70A368371D>

Some of these things are WORSE—social media combines positive reinforcement with negative. Missing something could matter—how you get your social news and general news.

It’s the repetition compulsion even when it’s not rewarding. DOOMSCROLLING. Ken Hillis (Online a Lot of the Time) compared this to ritual—feels real—and even sort of worship (Google and the Culture of Search) when people become dependent on searching (“what should I do today?”).

Remember the combination of dependence and exhaustion? You keep coming back—that’s the repetition compulsion.

None of this is accidental. It’s how the “attention economy” works ([Griffiths “Adolescent social networking: How do social media operators facilitate habitual use?” *Education and Health*, 2018](#)): in gambling, it’s the gambler who gives you money. It’s essentially them paying to play, and that’s all. On social media, it’s advertisers and people who want your data: you aren’t the workers, because you aren’t getting paid, and you’re not the consumer, because the system isn’t designed to make you happy: you’re the cows making meat for the market—or milk if that’s too grim for you. In any case, social media is *for the advertisers* not *for you*—you’re just Ben Rogers. Remember him? No? Because *he’s not famous*. Tom Sawyer is famous, and Ben Rogers is just the kid he tricked into painting the fence for him. He doesn’t get a Rush song.

By the way, once you've decided to paint the fence, it will only get worse: the longer you spend on social media, the more data they companies have, and the more they can target their approaches to you

- [Bhargava, Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction, Business Ethics Quarterly, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/business-ethics-quarterly/article/ethics-of-the-attention-economy-the-problem-of-social-media-addiction/1CC67609A12E9A912BB8A291FDFFE799#ref80](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/business-ethics-quarterly/article/ethics-of-the-attention-economy-the-problem-of-social-media-addiction/1CC67609A12E9A912BB8A291FDFFE799#ref80)

This is dramatized in *The Social Dilemma* in the scene with Vincent Kartheiser (Pete Campbell from *Mad Men*, playing the three AI's trying to convince someone to use social media more).

Overuse of social media might have lots of bad effects—for all my fourth century monk fans (John of Cassian) you can identify all the seven deadly sins:

- Pride (social media boasting),
- Anger (above, and like, every thread ever—death threats over music preferences, so on),
- Vanity (oh hello, I didn't see you there taking my picture!),
- Greed (I'm on a boat! My bag costs a lot!),
- Acedia/Sloth (one more minute online, away from people),
- Envy (good studies on this—fear of missing out/FOMO, etc),
- Gluttony (not just “look at my Instagram pasta!” but also the way we consume the media)

Maybe you don't think all these things are bad—Al Pacino was pretty convincing at the end of *Devil's Advocate*, after all, especially when he's standing next to Keanu Reeves—but they *do* explain the appeal of the systems.

There's research on this...it's also related to depression, low self esteem, general misery Study in *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (Melissa Hunt, Katherine All, Brennan Burns and Kyler Li): spending a lot of time on social media, using it actively, and following strangers are linked to depression, low self-esteem. Following friends and limiting use = best results.

- More evidence: [El-Khoury, Joseph & Kanj, Rama & Haidar, Riwa & Bou Ali, Linda & Majari, Ghaidaa. \(2021\). Characteristics of social media 'detoxification' in university students. Libyan Journal of Medicine. 16. 10.1080/19932820.2020.1846861.](https://doi.org/10.1080/19932820.2020.1846861)

It has all the problems of addiction in general—poor academic and work performance, worse family relationships, again, depression, health effects of poor diet less exercise more tobacco and alcohol, suicide, social isolation...even declines in cognitive performance and attention, which is, hey, better social media consumer
(Bhargava)

Now we have to talk about your phone. Sorry.

In the 2011 book *Machine Man* by Max Berry, an engineer forgets his phone at home one day and is so distracted that he loses a leg in an accident. Gradually, in the name of efficiency, he replaces his whole body with mechanical parts. There's a lot of other stuff going on here, like a commentary about disability, but start at the beginning: his phone is so connected to him that it's "part of his body," even more significant in the end than his actual body.

Do you feel like that? Ever forget your phone and freak out?

Average person interacts with their phone (click, swipe, etc—any interaction) about 2,600 times EVERY DAY.

Alerts, ringtones, vibration: they get you to check. It's part of the attention economy
(Griffiths)

Oh, and you do, even when there's no alert—on average, people compulsively check their phone every 12 minutes
(Soror)

You probably don't think about it—Wendy Chun (*Updating to Remain the Same*) argues that a key horizon for social media is not when it becomes obsolete, necessarily—think Myspace or Second Life—but when it becomes habitual and invisible. Like the engineer, you only notice it when something's wrong, and otherwise it's invisible. Are you thinking about your lightbulbs right now?

What can you do?

Well, maybe not much. Because you're dumb. And so am I. So are your friends and neighbors and so was Albert Einstein. Let me explain.
(Mercier and Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason*)

You have about three pounds of wrinkly meat in your skull. Its design is millions of years old, and a lot of it might be mostly full of sports trivia and facts about the Kardashians and it's supposed to manage everything you do all the time. They have a trillion-dollar industry with massive adaptive algorithms designed some of the smartest people in the world, and all they do is try to figure out how to addict you to something that you are already evolved to want. It doesn't seem fair, does it?

But don't feel so bad. As a lot of tech-industry commentators are quick to say, *The Social Dilemma* focuses on bad parts of the technology. It has good ones, too, or at least very complicated ones, like its potential to effect politics, which we'll talk about next week. For you, it might help you access information very quickly. Belong to a community—religious, gender, sexual, ethnic—when you feel isolated. Is your phone bad? Not if you're lost. Not if you like books. Etc. There are counterexamples to all of these studies, and we just don't really know—the best ev I have seen tends strongly negative, but this is a fairly new experiment, too.

Can you do things to help yourself?

Not a ton of solutions in *Social Dilemma*. Jaron Lanier, in the doc, wrote a book called “Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now.” Maybe Congress will regulate us to freedom? (Fat chance).

It's up to you, but you're not powerless.

What follows is mostly my advice, some of which has research support and some of which does not.

Start by asking yourself “Why do I do this?” and “What *about* this makes me happy, if anything?”

That might help you figure out what to use and how. LinkedIn? Hundreds of millions of users, but on average 17 minutes per month. Academia.edu? Its own kind of evil, but it's there. Stay in touch with your family? Maybe you need to call them more. Etc.

Cut out the things that make you unhappy. Celebrities? Maybe...but “influencers?” Maybe not. Think hard about your experiences as you have them: does looking at this account of rich people enjoying things you can't have make you happier?

Think of alternatives. Read on Kindle if you're bored. Spend your time in Wikipedia rabbit holes—the rabbits won't implicitly insult your body image or try to sell you anything. Learn a language on Pittsburgh's own Duolingo, or any of its many competitors.

Following friends and limiting use = best results. (El-Khoury)

All of these things might help you. Last week, we talked about the content of what you see on social media. You see some pretty nasty stuff. Conspiracy theories, misinformation, disinformation. This week, we talked more about the form of social media and how the ways that the technology actually works changes individuals.

Suggested Reading:

- Natasha Schüll, [*Addiction by Design*](#)
- Tim Wu, [*The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*](#)
- Ken Hillis, [*Online a Lot of the Time*](#) & [*Google and the Culture of Search*](#)
- Max Barry, [*Machine Man*](#)
- Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, [*The Enigma of Reason*](#)
- Wendy Chun, [*Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*](#)
- Jaron Lanier, [*Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*](#)

For a full list of book recommendations, visit:

www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-social-media

Presenter Contact Information:

Calum Matheson, PhD

Assistant Professor of Public Deliberation and Civic Life and Director of Debate

University of Pittsburgh Department of Communication

matheson@pitt.edu

www.comm.pitt.edu/person/calum-matheson-phd