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# Social Media, Identity, and Careful Culture: How Online Social Networks Limit Identity, Amplify Difference, and Diminish Social Cohesion

Aaron Balick, Ph.D.

**ABSTRACT**
Almost a decade after the publication of *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking*, this article develops its thesis further by addressing the socio-cultural frame in which social media is embedded. The ways in which identity is expressed online are deeply tied to powerful undercurrents of culture change and development. The architecture of social media serves to limit the expression of identity by fragmenting users into disparate online identity-based communities that enforce in-group norms, amplify differences between groups, and inhibit productive dialogue, empathy, and understanding. This creates a "careful culture" where certainty is amplified at the expense of ambivalence, uncertainty, and open exploration and dialogue. Real life examples from social media are utilized to illustrate the underlying dynamics that activate them.

**KEYWORDS**
Social media; psychoanalysis; social networking; Twitter; digital culture; technology

## Introduction

One fateful night in the summer of 2011 a young woman experiencing the onset of an anxiety attack sought to reassure herself by typing her therapist's name into Google. Eleven keystrokes later she found herself even more distressed. Information about her therapist that had previously been unknown to her suddenly made him seem unfamiliar, alien, and unsafe. Such was the degree of her distress that she phoned him the very next morning to terminate the therapy. The therapist was deeply troubled to learn that information about him had been acquired without his awareness and outside the therapeutic frame found himself short on ideas about how to handle this unanticipated set of affairs. That therapist was me.

In 2011 there was a dearth of resources about the novel ways in which new technologies might impinge upon therapeutic space. Though it was difficult, my patient and I were able to work through it, and as a result I later published a clinical paper on "virtual impingement" and related phenomena (Balick, 2012). Two years after that I followed up with *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking* (2014) (*PSN*) where I pushed beyond the clinical encounter to explore how online social networks mediate our need for recognition (Benjamin, 1988). Because the book was inspired by a personal experience, it primarily focusses on intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics leaving the socio-cultural frame largely unexplored. The events of 2016 brought that frame sharply into focus. The Brexit referendum in the UK followed by the election of Donald Trump in the US exposed the manipulative power of big data in the wrong hands as well as the ways in which algorithms distort how information is conveyed across networks. Ten years on from the publication of *PSN*, this essay attempts to redress the balance by bringing in the socio-cultural frame more directly. I will be exploring how contemporary cultural dynamics and social media synergistically influence online self-expression in ways that have important consequences for both individuals and society at large.

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To this end I draw on events that I have witnessed as a participant-observer with an active social media presence, using them to illustrate the processes that I have identified.[1]

## A short theoretical underpinning

Online social networks mediate relationships in a variety of ways that are dependent on the platform (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.); the individual (personality, mood, psychological state, etc.); and the culture in which they are embedded. While social media platforms differ widely, they all reduce complexity and consequently distort the dynamics of relating in ways that amplify the expression of certain psychodynamics (e.g., splitting and projection) while inhibiting or disabling others (e.g., empathy and mentalization): namely by reducing subjects to objects (Balick, 2014). Outward leaning ego-elements like the false self and persona are amplified and fixed through validating reinforcement such as likes, follows, and comments, a process that Facebook's first president, Sean Parker describes as "a social validation feedback loop" (Allen, 2017). Jacob Johanssen, author of *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture*, notes that desire to connect and share online with others is a natural one echoing "a wider cultural trend that suggests that it is important, healthy, and liberating to disclose and engage with our inner feelings, anxieties, and desires" (2019, p. 74). He continues, "such spaces do not make for safe and healthy spaces but are characterised by ambivalence, fragility, and hatred as well as love, cooperation and support" (p. 75). Because these spaces lack the safety of what can be understood as the virtual equivalent of Winnicott's (1960) "holding" environment, they may also inhibit self-exploration. Consequently, users are drawn to like-minded communities within their networks where they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and safety. The cost of this membership, however, requires learning the group's rules of association which are usually acquired through observation and/or (often painful) personal experience. In practice this means adjusting one's online expression so it keeps to the implicit rules of that community: a strategy that can be understood as identity performance.

These performances go well beyond just *acting the part*, they "create and reify who we are within and for our social groups and give us a sense of self" (Gratch & Gratch, 2022, p. 17). Online, these identities become digital extensions of ourselves which are maintained on social media by "shaping our own narrative identities online and performing our traits, ethos, and personae *for our audience(s)*.[2] Meanwhile, we interpret the digital identities of others through the media traces we access about them" (p. 17). The performance of identity, already a partial representation of self, becomes even more partial when expressed online. In short, online identity limits its expression with specific reference to its real and imagined audiences (Litt, 2012) thereby subjugating large parts of the Self,[3] which is by nature complex, multi-layered, and contradictory.

> While our social roles and identity performances are multiple and vary by context, many social media platforms are designed so users are coerced into creating a singular, uniform, narrative identity. Through the limitations and biases built into the interfaces we use, identity performances in these spaces are also always partial, generally interpreted as such, and are often catered to a specific and immediate audience. (Gratch & Gratch, pp. 33–34)

These real and imagined audiences are internalized and operate as parts of the superego, overseeing and monitoring our actions, incorporating any given social norms as a moral "conscience" (Freud, 1923). As we know, superegos are subject to becoming overbearing, persecutory, "super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be" (p. 54). The limiting way in which social media creates uniform identities intensifies this, mitigating against expressions of uncertainty, ambiguity, or

[1]Full disclosure: this is an essay in the formal sense, that is, a tentative attempt to grasp and unpick what I am seeing. I hope you will forgive the unorthodox approach of relying on idiosyncratic data that I have come across – but in my favor – this is indeed representative of the unique ways in which we all access our social media landscapes.

[2]Our audiences are both real and imagined. My italics.

[3]My use of Self (with the capital S) refers to the entirety of the psyche of which narrative identity, associated with the ego, is only a part.

further exploration in exchange for limited expressions of certainty that meet the rules of the given community. This runs contrary to the internal activity of the mind which is by nature ambivalent, searching, and often contradictory. Though our spontaneous reactions and autonomous thoughts may not be for sharing, they do need to be recognized, accepted, and worked-through as they are an important function of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and learning. Social media's demand for unitary expression within its fragmented in-groups inhibits this discovery process, preferring the expression fixed ideas. Though we can't see these internal processes as work, we can infer them through what we do see in the nature and tone of the online expression of identity performances. And nowhere are the consequences of these dynamics better observed than on Twitter.

## The paradox of Twitter

Twitter offers the opportunity for unfettered access to a wide diversity of people from around the world while at the same time clustering them into disparate groups with common(ish) points of view (e.g., Freelon et al., 2017); it is also a great leveler, amplifying previously under-represented voices and difficult social issues in unprecedented ways, while at the same time enabling these issues to be expressed via empty gestures like virtue-signaling and "slacktivism." Finally, as we shall see, Twitter is at the same time a cacophony of noise as well as a vast sea of silence.

Global reach and amplification are exemplified on Twitter in the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements. Me Too was already a decade old by the time the Harvey Weinstein allegations gave it an impressive boost when female celebrities galvanized the hashtag anew, illuminating the massive scale of sexual assault suffered by women. Similarly, when the graphic cruelty of George Floyd's murder by a white police officer was recorded and distributed across the Internet, it produced a critical mass of awareness for Black Lives Matter, far beyond any that had preceded it. These explosions into mainstream public consciousness may have been provoked by singular events, but important work on both issues had been ongoing for years. Before George Floyd, the conversation around racism was alive in the cultural consciousness, especially after Reni Eddo-Lodge's blog post "Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race" (2014) was widely disseminated across social media, quickly becoming an education for many of the white people about whom it was speaking. The global context in which Floyd's murder occurred at the height of lockdowns was the spark that made BLM go truly global across social media.

However, deeply engrained social issues like these are not resolved by hashtags and blacked out profile photos – awareness is not social change – but awareness is a necessary step that should not be summarily dismissed. Social networks transmit awareness well – the question is how deep that awareness goes, and whether it can activate social change or just a performance of it. It is one thing to have liked or shared Eddo-Lodge's blogpost, it is altogether another thing if you have read it, thought about it, and took it forward.[4] In the wake of Floyd's murder many individuals, organizations, and businesses replaced profile images with a black box as a symbolic gesture of solidarity with BLM; it is in actions like these, and the responses to them, that the paradox of social media is laid bare. For many these gestures were well-meaning signals of solidarity with the BLM cause: while others saw it more problematically, as empty signals that begged the question, *what are you doing about it?* And while the demand for action over gesture is an important one, we can't really know what kinds of actions are or are not being taken outside those gestures. That's because social media is designed to carry gestures, not actions: communication across the medium is *necessarily gesticular*.

These gestures, when made by an individual, also communicate the online expression of identity, driven by the ego's need to situate itself in a social context. However, because social media is embedded in culture, these ego expressions activate powerful and unresolved cultural currents into which they get pulled. Choosing to swim in these raging waters of culture as an individual is to

[4]In 2020 Twitter, identifying that news stories were being shared widely without being read first, added functionality that prompted those sharing news stories to read them before re-tweeting them.

subject oneself to its power forces. To better comprehend dynamics of this, we must unpick how collective *and* individual dynamics interact with each other as they are mediated across social media today.

## The individual as proxy for global wounds

Individual identity expression across social media can activate powerful socio-cultural currents that are then expressed between individuals. In such cases there are at least three variables at play: the individual, the social, and the social media platform. As we have seen earlier, the platforms tend to mitigate against complex subjectivity, preferring to render identity into crude categories that represent how we perceive and how we are perceived across our social media landscape. They influence everything from who we follow and what content we seek, to how we read, understand, and interpret that content; they also importantly influence the very algorithms that curate our experiences online.

How one's identity is perceived is central to online experience, and however unwieldy and crude their labels, we nonetheless find ourselves being read through them. In his recent book, *Fantasy, Online Misogyny and the Manosphere* (2022), Johanssen felt it necessary to situate himself within a set of identity categories in order to contextualize himself as a subject and author of his book. Though describing himself as a "White, cis-heterosexual, middle-class, left-wing, feminist" he clearly struggles with the crudeness of those categories by adding "I don't feel like those attributes would communicate much about who I am … " (p. 21). He goes on for nearly a paragraph feeling compelled to contextualize himself, yet struggling to do what he feels he must. I equally feel compelled to situate myself within similar identity categories in this very paper, but only reluctantly. I see this compulsion and ambivalence as a symptom of the larger social dynamics that implicate *identity* into everything we say or do. And though it would be true that our *subjectivity* is implicated in everything we say and do, identity categories as we tend to apply them are too blunt a tool to accurately represent us. Even so, here we go: I am a progressive, well-educated, middle-class, white, cis-gendered, gay man, living in the UK and working in the mental health field. So now you know me, right? Of course not. While reflexivity and transparency is crucial for a reflexive researcher, these crude reductions are plainly problematic. Either way these constructs do serve as a "necessary fiction" (Goldner, 1991) which colors the way in which we contribute online and how those contributions are perceived by others. Taking these as "necessary fictions" would be a good start, but on social media, they appear instead to be taken as concrete realities. It is the ways in which these crude identity categories are interpellated that contributes to the mixing of social and individual registers on social media.

The war in Ukraine also provoked a wave of gestural solidarity provoking a similar backlash as had occurred with BLM, wherein those who changed their profile photos to images of the Ukrainian flag were sometimes attacked for *not* having expressed solidarity with other ongoing conflicts further afield. Such expressions of solidarity with Ukraine were seen as symptomatic of the preferences and concerns of the Global North being highlighted over and above other issues. The *fact* of this is undeniably true, particularly as the war has been covered in Western mainstream media as explored by writers such as Hellyer (2022) in *The Washington Post*, White (2022) in *The Independent* and Bayoumi (2022) in *The Guardian* to name just a few. The issue isn't whether it is true, rather it's the elision of this social truth being expressed through and between individuals[5] in the form of "calling out" and personal attack: here the individual has become a proxy for the larger socio-cultural issue. After all, it is not unreasonable for someone to more readily express concern about something they understand than something they don't; for something more proximate over something more distant; for something immediately arising over something ongoing; or for something in which there is a personal connection over something where there is not. The same rules apply to those raising these

[5]Calling out biased reporting, politicians, or policies on social media, as these writers have done, is a much more direct response.

concerns. They are likely doing so because they have a deeper connection to these other conflicts through a personal stake like geography, kinship, or history,[6] which is what makes all the attention on Ukraine so stinging for them. Lastly, an expression of solidarity with Ukraine does not exclude the possibility that this same individual may have previously expressed similar sentiments about other conflicts, or engaged in offline actions of support (marches, donations, etc.) that may not be visible on their social media feed.

These quite rational qualifiers are due to the emotional charge that is being activated when personal expression and themes of social injustice synergize though the proxy of the individual. The individual making the gesture is reduced to a two-dimensional caricature, becoming a representation of injustice itself while the one doing the calling out is equally reduced in the mind of the gesture maker; this is not a recipe for empathy. When one is called out, they naturally become defensive, attack back, or withdraw. We will see these patterns repeated again and again here. These heated dynamics do little to activate real social change, rather they create a form of learned helplessness due to the seeming impossibility of getting it right. They create a dialectic of moral superiority and shame that provokes mutual defensiveness which ultimately contributes to what I call "careful culture."[7] Online, careful culture is enforced by the surveillance of others while offline it is internalized by the subject who incorporates its rules in choosing what is or isn't acceptable to express outwardly.

## Us and them

Because careful culture can be such a dangerous place, one needs the back-up of supportive others with resonant values, groups that offer a sense of belonging that can make it safer to speak one's voice. Belonging, however, is achieved at a cost, that is the reifying and delimiting of what is acceptable to express through implicit sets of rules. In-groups arise and then fragment and proliferate, each with their own sets of rules and membership criteria, popping up like islands of noise amidst a vast sea of silence. We can see this fragmentation happening amongst groups we might otherwise think have more that unites than divides them.

The following example represents just one window into the fractious goings-on within the gender and sexual identity rights movements. It is the story of Kathleen Stock, a former professor at Sussex University, described as a feminist and "left wing lesbian" (Turner, 2012) who was subjected to a vicious campaign to have her sacked for her gender critical beliefs. These events were set in motion after the local paper, *The Argus*, published an interview in which she stated that as a feminist she believed that single sex spaces for women should exclude "transgender people who still have male genitalia." She went on to say "I vocally assert the rights of trans people to live their lives free from fear, violence, harassment or any discrimination. I think that discussing female rights is compatible with defending these trans rights" (Doherty-Cove, 2018). Her exclusionary position was described as harmful, discriminatory, and transphobic by her detractors kicking off a brutal campaign that ensued both on campus and online creating an "aggressive and intimidating environment" (Hinsliff, 2021) that ultimately compelled her to resign. Though Stock's initial interview explicitly states her support for trans rights and the university stated in a letter that "no substantive allegations of wrongdoing have been made against her" (Adams, 2021), a critical mass had already made up its mind. The Student Union argued that Stock *was* questioning the rights of trans and non-binary students and sharing "discriminatory narratives"; later, a letter penned by several hundred academics stated that her "'harmful rhetoric' about transgender and gender non-conforming people reinforced 'the patriarchal status quo'" and that academic freedom "should not be used to harm people, particularly the more vulnerable members of our community" (Adams, 2021). Here we see the progression

[6]A corollary may be the causes or charities we support. One may support a cancer charity because they lost a loved one to cancer, but this doesn't mean that one does not care about diabetes.

[7]One might imagine an alternative scenario where the gesture of support is seen as a teachable moment, for example, "I see you are concerned about Ukraine. I wonder if you are aware of a similar situation happening in X?" The reason why this rarely happens is that the functioning of social media mitigates against it, pulling for tetchy binaries in lieu of productive dialogue.

toward polarization into two groups set up in opposition to each other, each accusing the other of oppression, and each claiming to be the victim of that oppression.

According to Stock, things felt different in the classroom. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she states that in general her students were open minded and even those that disagreed with her "wouldn't hold it against me as a personal character flaw" (Hinsliff, 2021). In other words, in real life the very real difference of opinions did not cascade into *ad hominem* attack. It was the behavior of her peers and their activities on social media that perplexed and surprised her the most. Instead of speaking directly to her about their concerns they denounced her on social media where she was called a bigot and compared to Jim Crow: "No peer ever said to me: 'look, I really object to what you're saying and I'd like to discuss it with you'" (Hinsliff, 2021). She goes on to interpret their actions on social media as performative: "The important thing is to show your tribe that you have the right morals and you could show that by saying 'I'm not with her" (Hinsliff, 2021). While there is a clear and material difference of opinion between Stock and her detractors about definitions of gender and exclusion, the ensuing fracas seems to have created an environment that made it impossible to work it through. It appears that no progress was made on the issue that instigated the row in the first place. Stock's resignation was celebrated by activists on social media (Adams, 2021), but this is clearly a pyrrhic victory. Wouldn't a greater success have been achieved, if not through agreement or resolution, some kind of mutual comprehension of each other's point of view? The only result was a hardening of opinions on both sides.

The very public events at Sussex University have been referred to as an example of cancel culture but Stock disagrees. She told *The Guardian* that she didn't feel silenced. Instead she asks, "why should anyone have to go through this in order to be able to say the relatively moderate things I'm saying? There are the hundreds of people who *are* silenced because they cannot face this. That's the problem" (Hinsliff, 2021). If there were hundreds of silent people, why may they have been so? Were they being careful? Stock certainly wasn't, and she paid the price for it. In situations like these the voices we hear on social media are saturated in *certainty*, in this case both Stock and her detractors were equally certain. Where there is uncertainty or complexity there is likely to be silence because speaking out risks one being painted into a tribe in which one does not feel they are a member. There is little room for "yes but" on Twitter. For example, one may disagree with Stock's opinion but still support her *right* to speak about it but to do so risks being construed as aligning oneself with the oppressor. We can find ourselves walking on eggshells so as not to be assigned to a position we don't hold simply because our position doesn't fit snuggly into the tribal constructs. Here, as in our previous examples, we see these skirmishes as symptomatic of important social struggles that are attempting to redress injustice through the redistribution of power, voice, and representation. Social media offers the opportunity for belonging, support, and agency but at the cost of fragmentation into crude and rigid identities that reduce individual subjectivity and group diversity.

## Destigmatising mental health or reifying diagnostics as identities?

The dismantling of stigma attached to mental illness has contributed to a massive improvement in the public discourse around it. Much of this work has been accomplished by people sharing their personal stories across social media normalizing psychological distress and increasing public understanding. An important aim of de-stigmatization has been to demonstrate that while a formal diagnosis is differentiated by its severity and the effect on one's life, we are *all* on a spectrum of human experience, mental illness is not something *other*. So it's curious to find that de-stigmatization has produced a flourishing range of identities firmly attached to diagnostic labels, which is very much the opposite of a shared spectrum of experience. The reification of diagnostic identities is concerning, not least because diagnostic categories are more labile than most people are aware. The encroachment of psychiatric diagnosis into the varied world of human "normality" concerned psychiatrist Allen Frances so much that he resigned his chair of the *DSM 5* for reasons he shared in his book *Saving Normal* (2013). These concerns include the lowering of the bar to

a psychiatric diagnosis; the proliferation of *new* psychiatric conditions over time; and the manualisation of psychiatry *ad absurdum*. "Nuanced psychiatry," he argues, "has become checklist psychiatry, homogenizing individual differences and custom-tailored treatments. Psychiatry, once too idiosyncratic and chaotic, has become too standardized and simpleminded"[8] (p. 26). Greater numbers of people coming under the purview of psychiatry risks increasing stigma which can give people A "sense of being damaged goods, feeling not normal or worthy, not a fully-fledged member of the group" (p. 109). Frances goes on to say that the stigma associated with a verifiable mental illness is bad enough, however:

> the stigma that comes from being mislabelled with a fake diagnosis is a dead loss with absolutely no redeeming features. Labels can also create self-fulfilling prophecies. If you are told you are sick, you feel and act sick, and others treat you as if you are sick. The sick role can be enormously useful when someone truly is sick and needs respite and care. But the sick role can be extremely destructive when it reduces expectations, truncates ambitions, and results in a loss of personal responsibility. (p. 109)

While Frances readily acknowledges the problem of identifying with internalised stigma (e.g. "I am GAD"), he did not anticipate the proliferation of self affirming identities that would coalesce around diagnostic categories[9] (e.g., "I am neurodivergent").[10] And while a self-affirming identity is doubtlessly a better outcome than identities based upon internalized stigma, the nature of such identities may threaten to enforce unnecessary limits and constrictions upon the vastly more complex and varied subject through the imposition of confining narratives about the Self. Very much like gender, sexuality, and race, mental health is a special category because it is so closely tied to our subjective lived experience. Perhaps that is why group identities based on mental health categories are so attractive. Yet the belonging they offer also serves to separate and differentiate rather than include them on the spectrum of shared human experience that varies by degree. Social media perpetuates and maintains these identities by positively reinforcing them through influencers; reifying narratives of difference; and producing self and group affirming memes that help to consolidate identities through repetition.

"Influencers" can achieve wide recognition and vast audiences for sharing their mental health stories and are often heralded as doing important work for the reduction of stigma. Their personal stories of living with anxiety, depression, psychosis, eating disorders, etc. are distributed in short-form video across various networks. Others who identify similarly see them as role models and as such they help to normalize their experiences and engender a sense of belonging. Narratives of mental health-based identities are reified through online communities that share like-for-like experiences, coping strategies, medications and support. Like everything else in social media, aspects of online self-expression are then reinforced through positive feedback and validated through likes, shares, and follows. The production of identity-based memes are created and widely shared amongst identity-based based groups centered around categories such as autism, anxiety, depression, self-harm, trauma, and ADHD and myriads more supported by a host of related hashtags such as #actuallyautistic or #adhdlife. All of these dynamics work synergistically to consolidate label-based identities through repetition, narrative reinforcement, and in-group echo chambers.

While it's clear how reinforcing illness-based narratives may be counter-productive, concerns about affirming ones may be less obvious because they have so many positive benefits like decreasing stigma, creating belonging, sharing of coping strategies, and raising awareness about the diagnostic category more widely. However they can also be reductive, limiting, and may impede the development of wider more inclusive self-identities. Introversion is a good example since it is not a diagnostic condition and was never conceived as such. Jung (1971) defined it as an *aspect of self*

[8]Frances is highlighting some spooky resonances between social media and psychiatry that include the lack of nuance within them and the business motives behind them (e.g., big pharma and the American private health insurance system). Though too much to explore here, both may be symptoms of late-stage capitalism.

[9]In very much the same way that "queer" has been reclaimed as a badge of pride.

[10]I want to stress that I am not critical of the relationship between identity and diagnostics *per se*, I am focussing exclusively here on the way in which social media serves to fix and ossify them in unhelpful and limiting ways.

that determined a *preference* for being energized though engagement with the interior of one's mind or by other people, not a unifying description of one's *character* as it often appears on social media. Jung warned of the dangers of identifying with our superior capacities at the expense of exploring our inferior ones. The introvert narrative on social media (sometimes elided with social anxiety disorder) presents itself as a *unitary characteristic* corralling aspects of universal human experience under its banner, as if they were the *sole* domain of introverts (e.g., a popular meme that reads: "Introvert Inclusion: sometimes we want to be left alone/ sometimes we want to be included/ most of the time we want to be included with the option to be left alone"). These label-based identities are defined by difference, rather than similarity, which serves to create the very othering effect that de-stigmatization sets out to reduce: only this time the othering arises from within rather than without. These narratives can also become unifying explanations for one's behavior and choices, "I do this because I am X" which can limit deeper exploration into what potential character traits and capacities may be developed. Identities are multiply constructed (Balick, 2008, 2011) not singularly constituted, and they continue to develop over the lifespan (Erikson, 1980). The process of individuation (Jung, 1966) requires a process of self-discovery in which we push beyond unitary identity narratives and open ourselves to new possibilities. The creation of label-based identities as maintained and reinforced on social media mitigates against individuation and constricts the possibility for the growth and expansion of the subject.

### *Deriving the signal from the silence as well as the noise*

We have now examined several examples of the ways in which social media structures and fragments individuals into identity-based communities and then deploys the loudest and most certain voices from the center of them though the cacophony draws the most attention we will now look to pull signal from the noise by drawing on Johanssen's (2019) psychoanalytic approach to digital culture. Johanssen's research explores audience engagement with the popular UK reality television programme *Embarrassing Bodies*, a show with a large social media presence. Johanssen found that, though his research subjects were deeply engaged with the programme, they were nonetheless suspiciously silent about it on Twitter. As this silence was clearly not representative of a lack of interest in the show, Johanssen suggests it may have been due to inhibition. Drawing on Freud, Johanssen defines inhibition as "a self-selected restriction of a situation to avert the affective experience of anxiety . . . a subjective state that protects against unintended or undesired encounters, ideas, or actions" (p. 70). The nature of the programme deals with intimate bodily issues providing ample opportunity for viewers to personally connect with it, identify with the patients seeking medical advice, and naturally reflect on their relationship with their own bodies and medical histories. Johanssen suggests that the *absence* of their tweets about the show may be correlated to how *deeply* they were touched by it:

> in so far as it facilitated unconscious and affective memories related to their own bodies. The programme resulted in such affective responses to the show that they may have been unable to engage with it on a communicative level . . . [their lack of participation on Twitter] may be because they [the doctors on the show] and the programme unconsciously touch and activate something in themselves that they are profoundly affected by . . . this 'something' related to affect and problematic bodily experiences that are too private to share online and are also difficult to put into words. (2019, p. 87)

While the *content* of Johanssen's research is different from what we have been discussing, it does resonate with issues of safety, privacy, and self-preservation that arise not in relation to the body, but to *subjectivity itself*. Inhibitions serve to keep safe those aspects of the self that are deeply personal, those aspects that do not neatly fit into the crude tribal identities we have identified. A tension arises between complex and multi-layered subjectivity and the reductive ways in which social media demands we perform our identity. From this we might infer that *silence arises as a symptom of protective inhibitions* that arise from the risk of being *too transparent*, which would risk exclusion

from the in-group, or *too performative*, which would be unacceptably inauthentic to the subject. In short, this inhibition serves to preserve authenticity either way, and silence may be an indicator of this inhibition.

The silent majority on Twitter isn't anecdotal: twenty-five percent of Twitter's user base accounts for 97% of tweets, with the rest accounting for a mere 3% of them[11] (McClain et al., 2021). That's an awful lot of silence. It gets worse. Of all that is posted across Twitter, only 14% is original material, the rest are re-tweets (49%) or replies (33%) (McClain et al., 2021). Talk about an echo chamber. The disproportionate source of "voice" across the network starts becoming very clear. Looking at children's social media is also illustrative. The *Children's Media Lives* report (OFCOM, 2022) is a longitudinal study of a single cohort of young people commissioned by the UK's communications regulator, that has been going on since 2014. Their most recent report found interesting changes in behavior between the 2020 and 2021 study, finding that children were consuming more and posting less than they did in 2020. Their reasons include a reluctance to put oneself "out there," feeling self-conscious and afraid of criticism, as well as not feeling able to compete with more professionalized content (OFCOM, 2022, p. 30): reasons that are resonant with my own suppositions. Further, the content they were consuming was not, as it was previously, posted by peers, but from brands and influencers (OFCOM, 2022, p. 27). Whereas in earlier studies there was a marked desire to become influencers themselves, this had diminished too. One reason provided was the fear of attracting negativity and being canceled (OFCOM, 2022, p. 31). For these young people social media is becoming *less social*: instead of a space to share with peers it has become become one for passively consuming content produced by influencers and brands. Influencers can be seen as *branded identities*: a kind of hyperbolic exemplar of the dynamics we've been discussing.

Computer scientist and tech philosopher Jaron Lainer has been warning about the dangers of social media for years, warnings that should be taken particularly seriously due to his long history within the Silicon Valley tech industry and his deep familiarity with how these things operate from the inside. In his book *Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018) Lanier refers to social media as a BUMMER machine – "Behavior of Users Modified, and Made into an Empire for Rent (p. 28)." Lanier, pointing to the business model behind most platforms, notes that since few users earn money from them, the only currency available to them is attention. In *PSN* I similarly pointed to the "digital economy of recognition" whereby the *psychological* currency across such networks is also attention in the form of validation.[12] Lanier argues that the way in which online social networks operate is to acquire people's attention by butting into their lives, cramming content down their throats, directing attention to them in sneaky ways, creating fake crowds and a "faker society," all in the interest of the social media company's shareholders. He amusingly concludes: "With nothing else to seek but attention, ordinary people tend to become assholes, because the biggest assholes get the most attention. This inherent bias towards assholedom flavors all the other parts of the BUMMER machine" (p. 30). I will modify this quite dark perspective slightly for our purposes. With regard to the psychodynamics we've been discussing, it's less about being an asshole than about how attention accumulates around certain expressions of voice that become certain, dominant and dominating at the exclusion of other quieter, less certain voices.[13] Ironically, this even seems to be the case when the content of the purported tribal message is *inclusion*. These expressions of voice are associated with a minority of users with a strong public identity, though they are not likely to be representative of all the individuals within the groups that they represent, and certainly not the majority at the margins or in the great seas of silence. These voices are disproportionately certain (or at least performing as certain) – and their opinions are echoed further through repetition (sharing) or engagement by others (comments; McClain et al., 2021). As a result, the vast majority of users are consuming distorted content with minimal active engagement themselves, and

[11]Study conducted on U.S.A.-based adults.

[12]I make the important distinction that validation is the low complexity version of the more complex and nourishing recognition we get from close interpersonal relationships.

[13]Okay, that definition is still redolent of an asshole.

are dissuaded from participating for the reasons we've been elucidating. What results is a careful culture that leaves little room for nuance, complexity, exploration, and dialogue.

## Conclusion

When I wrote *PSN* more than a decade ago I drew on Kranzberg's (1986) first law, "Technology neither good nor bad: nor is it neutral" (p. 545) and chose to reserve judgment about social media's value to culture; if anything, I was hopeful and excited about what was to come. Now I must say that my naïve sense of agnosticism has been somewhat compromised. In my conclusion I stated the following:

> The need to relate has not changed. The need to recognise and be recognised has not changed. The need to see and be seen has not been altered. The architecture, however, of the ways we do all these fundamental things that make us human has indeed changed, and that may be changing us; for these reasons we need to understand the psychodynamics of social networking. (p. 157)

In this essay I hoped to address "how that might be changing us" with an added focus on the socio-cultural frame. On the optimistic side we have seen how social media has power to transmit awareness better than anything that has preceded it, as demonstrated by the Me Too and BLM movements. And though the conversations around these and so many other important issues are so fractious, they are important ones to be had. All around me I see individuals and organizations trying their best to be responsive to issues of race, diversity, ability, intersectionality, and inclusion. This work is being done because of decades of grass roots education and advocacy that were only recently amplified across the globe by social media. Arising alongside this awareness are the issues I have sought to highlight in this paper – the narrowing and hardening of identities, the fragmentation of society into small identity-based groups, and the development of a careful culture that makes dialogue so difficult. Essentially, I believe that most of us have more commonalities than differences, but jealously guarded identity positions as they are structured across our social media landscapes better deploy fragmentation and division. Of particular concern is the way social media tends to divide groups that would otherwise seek alliance and mutual support, leaving more important looming threats under-challenged. The way in which social media encourages fragmentation and divisiveness threatens to undermine the work that is required to address the very social issues that provokes these fractious events. What we are seeing is symptomatic of our society's current move to redress post-colonial power structures that have historically privileged certain voices over others, structures that would be better off transformed into models that are more equitable to everyone. The hoped for connecting power of online social networks dreamed of by technological utopians has clearly not arrived: it may not be too late.

While social media amplifies previously lesser heard voices thereby increasing awareness of important social issues, it also undermines the capacity for fruitful dialogue which could ultimately result in shared understanding and positive social change. While united voices are certainly better heard, if they reproduce the same old power structures of certainty, uniformity, and the creation of binaries, they will activate defensiveness, fragmentation, and a careful culture that serves to silence a the wider diversity of voices that better reflect the delicate mix of nuance, complexity, unsureness, inner-conflict, and dazzling paradox that make us human. If there is a more optimistic takeaway from this paper it is this. Once we recognize what social media does, we can use it productively for those purposes while taking the other work that needs to be done elsewhere where it can be put to better use. We cannot expect social media to deliver the action and hard work that is required to affect positive social change, it's just not built for that. If, however we identify what it *can do* and consciously use it for those purposes, we can create other spaces, new spaces, online or off, that can enable real dialogue, real work, and real social change. This way we will be using the architecture of each space with recognition of its capacities, and not the other way around.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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