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Social Media: On Tech-Caves, Virtual Panopticism, and the Science Fiction-Like State In Which We Unwittingly Find Ourselves

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Social Media: On Tech-Caves, Virtual Panopticism, and the Science Fiction-Like State In
Which We Unwittingly Find Ourselves

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Abstract

Making use of three historic philosophical thought experiments, this paper blends psychological perspectives with philosophical reasoning to show how social media is corrupting our perception of reality, the result of which is ultimately detrimental to society as a whole. This is accomplished by first using Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" to analyze and discuss the ways in which social media is limiting humanity's access to real knowledge. Next, Michel Foucault's analysis of punishment in its social context, *Discipline and Punish*, is used to discuss the ways in which social media is adversely affecting our behavior. Finally, Robert Nozick's "Experience Machine" is used to elucidate how social media mediates our experiences of the world in ways that undermine our life's meaning and pleasure. In bringing this combined conception to light, practical suggestions are made throughout both the Objections section and the Conclusion of the paper. Whereas some may view the suggestions put forth as simplistic or undemanding given the seemingly complex substance of the bulk of the paper, given how interweaved social media is within the developed world today, taking a less hard-line position and approach seems far more realistically practical. Thus, this paper espouses a pragmatic view, aiming for practical solutions and focusing on the positive and realistic expected consequences of those solutions, as opposed to less practical, idealistic proposals.

Social Media: On Tech-Caves, Virtual Panopticism, and the Science Fiction-Like State in
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It is a strange and interesting thing, a Vonnegut-like twist, that through the advancement of technology, human beings have limited our existence, confining our realities in meaningful ways. Nearly universally throughout the developed world, a similar phenomenon is occurring each day. We wake up, silence our smart-phone alarms, and shortly thereafter we are on Facebook. Perhaps there is a notification on Twitter, so we check it and peruse for a few more minutes, enjoying the abruptness of the 280-character-or-less comments and responses. LinkedIn has a “2” on top of its icon, so that is our next virtual stop. Nearly a half-hour after waking up, a conversation has been had with a friend via Facebook, while a New Yorker article was simultaneously consumed, and our average Joe or Jill has responded to three e-mails, all from the palm of their hand. Human beings are obsessed with our “smart” mobile devices, and more specifically, social media. Every developed nation in the world uses social networking to some capacity, with Facebook, the current behemoth of social media interactivity, registering 2.07 billion active users as of September 30, 2017.ⁱ Further, in quarter three of 2016, the Nielsen Company found that 98% of people ages 18-24 in the United States carried and used smart phones regularly, compared to 97% of those ages 25-34, and 96% of those 35-44, 89% of those 45-54, 80% of those 55-64, and 68% of those aged 65 and older.ⁱⁱ And we start early. Teenagers (14-17) carry smart phones at an astounding 85% rate, while 69% of those in the 11-13 year old range are carrying the devices, and 31% of those 8-10 years old.ⁱⁱⁱ

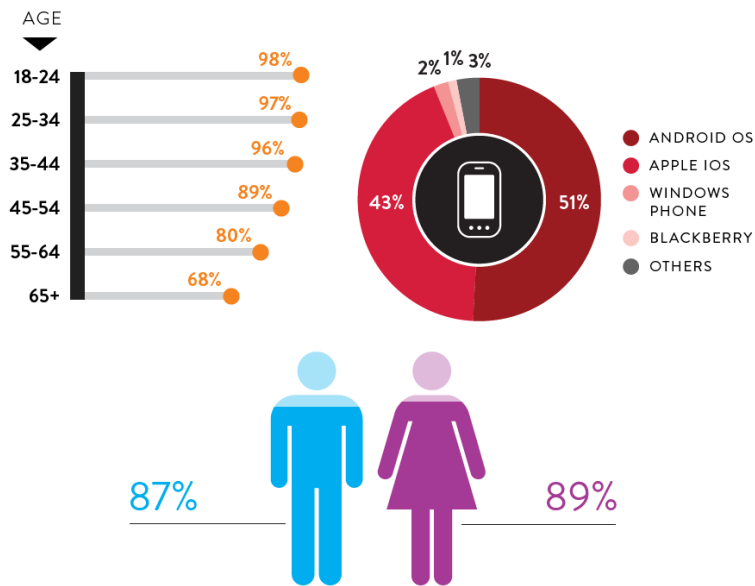
Given the prolific usage of social media and mobile device technologies, it is, as psychologists Metzler and Scheithauer point out, “important to examine the consequences of its usage.”^{iv} “Social scientists and psychologists are gathering a wealth of empirical data on these trends,” explains Dr. Shannon Vallor of Santa Clara University, “yet philosophical analysis of their ethical implications remains comparatively impoverished.”^v This impoverishment is fascinating, as social media and mobile technology clearly play a prominent role in our daily lives, and it could thus be assumed, in our perception and development of epistemological (and other) viewpoints. Further, there seems to exist the potential for “these new technologies to significantly affect the manner in which humans pursue the good life,”^{vi} which in and of itself would seemingly make such analysis worthwhile, and in fact urgently critical. The argument could certainly be made that advances and changes of this sort in human activity and history are of the greatest importance, as the adoption of social media and new technologies by people across the spectrum of ages will have a prominent and enduring impact on the future of customs, institutions, and a slew of areas far too extensive to list here – in short: humanity as a whole.

In this paper, I demonstrate how social media corrupts our understanding of reality, regulating our behavior in such a way that we are made disingenuous, giving us less meaning in our relationships and thereby lives, and encouraging us to seek the wrong sorts of pleasures and experiences, that are divorced from reality. I do so by first using Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to analyze and discuss the ways in which social media is limiting humanity’s access to real knowledge. Next, I use Michel Foucault’s analysis of punishment in its social context, *Discipline and Punish*, to discuss the ways in which

social media is adversely affecting our behavior. Finally, I use Robert Nozick's "Experience Machine" to show that social media mediates our experiences of the world in ways that undermine our life's meaning and pleasure – not only would we choose the machine, but to our detriment, in many ways have already made the choice.

US SMARTPHONE MARKET SHARE BY AGE, OPERATING SYSTEM AND GENDER, Q3 2016

SMARTPHONE OWNERSHIP



Read as: During Q3 2016 51% of smartphone owners used a handset that runs on the Android operating system.
Source: Nielsen Mobile Insights

PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE: Why parallels that can be drawn between common social media interactivity and practices, and Plato's prisoners in the Cave, should be concerning

A mere 2,400 years prior to the advent of social media, in Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato introduced the Allegory of the Cave, a dialogue between Plato's brother Glaucon and his mentor Socrates. Socrates describes for Glaucon a group of prisoners, chained in a cave, facing a blank wall for the entirety of their lives, constricted in such a way that they are rendered unable to turn their heads or bodies away from it. Upon the wall appear shadows, projections caused by a fire behind the prisoners, and local people playing puppet-masters, carrying objects and representations, "all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent."^{vii} The "puppeteers" are separated from the prisoners by a wall, and they walk behind the wall in such a way that their figures (bodies) are not reflected, "built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets."^{viii} Thus, the projections on the wall and the sounds that the chained unfortunates hear and associate with the shadows become the only reality the prisoners know, and being aware of one another, they name them, as human beings always have (see Figure 1). "'They're like us,' I said. 'For in the first place, do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them?' 'How could they,' he said, 'if they had been compelled to keep their heads motionless throughout life?'"^{ix} Plato goes on to discuss what would happen were one of the prisoners to be released. After adapting to the light, he would realize the power of the sun, as the cause, in a way, of the shadows

that he had seen before, and eventually, having this new knowledge, would consider his time in the cave, and pity those with whom he had been constrained. Plato concludes the Allegory by explaining that the other prisoners, were the man to descend back into the darkness and return to them, would consider him corrupted, that they would not believe his story or accept his truths.



Figure 1. Plato's Cave.

The prisoners within Plato's cave are representative of society, of people who believe knowledge comes from their empirical understanding of the world. For Plato, knowledge comes from justified true belief, from philosophical, reasoned consideration and understanding. The prisoners within the cave are trapped, "Then most certainly, such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things."^x The shadows are representative of the perception of those who believe empirical evidence entails knowledge; they are representative of the perceptions of the prisoners (the perception of society). The prisoner who escapes the trap of their misguided perception represents the philosopher, breaking from society and seeking knowledge that comes from outside of their empirical senses and understanding; they represent the search for truth and wisdom. The sun, which provides the escaped prisoner with an understanding beyond that which they could previously observe empirically, signifies truth and

knowledge via reasoning. The escapee's return and subsequent rejection by those who have remained within the cave is representative of society's inherent apprehensiveness towards reason, and preference for that which they empirically believe to be true, even often times despite evidence to the contrary.

Socrates makes it clear that for those in the cave, life is two-dimensional, limited to what they see in front of them and can be empirically observed. Modern-day science and technology have made an incredible abundance of information, as well as educational opportunities, available to the bulk of the developed world. While the overload of information afforded via internet search engines, countless news sources, public as well as online libraries, institutions of higher learning ranging from online universities and community colleges to four-year universities, and so forth, can at times seem a labyrinth to navigate, it simultaneously begs humankind to question, to search, and to consider what is true. To live life today without contemplation and the search for understanding is akin to laziness, or perhaps the result of deep-seated apathy; to do so is to choose ignorance.

Despite the amount of information available for consumption in mere seconds from nearly innumerable sources, for many social media has evolved into their preferred source of news and information. Such social media users commonly surround themselves with likeminded "friends," people who belong to a common group of virtual acquaintances, and who commonly post articles and report on issues and news stories within the group. Social media users around the world are transfixed with the screens in front of them, and social media networks have altered the way in which human beings interact and communicate with one another. *Toronto Globe and Mail* columnist Douglas

Cornish summoned a common refrain when he wrote, “Will this glow [from the internet] produce a closed generation of socially challenged individuals, humans who are more comfortable with machines than anything else?”^{xi} Others, such as Anna Metzler and Herbert Scheithauer at Freie Universität Berlin, view this interaction as being perfectly acceptable, “a training ground for increasing adolescents’ social skills.”^{xii} However, according to their own data, “today’s adolescents spent a large amount of time on SNSs (Social Networking Sites) as they are the first generation of ‘digital natives’.”^{xiii} In fact, they explain that “40% of participants (aged 14-17 years) spend two or more hours daily on SNSs.”^{xiv} This being the case, it seems immediately debatable whether SNSs represent a training ground or a replacement for social interaction, and it becomes even more imperative that we reduce the impoverished state of philosophical analysis on this topic, as it is, in the words of Scheithauer and Metzler, “important to examine the consequences of its usage.”^{xv}

Psychologically speaking, it does seem that a fair amount of research and consideration is being directed at the topic, the work of Scheithauer and Metzler, both psychologists, being a perfect example. Thus, while the mental and emotional states of social media users are being analyzed and considered, a great deal is being ignored from an epistemological perspective. The questions of what brings about or gives rise to true knowledge, and when users have attained knowledge, are being regularly put to task on social media. Users frequently present varying perspectives and opposite viewpoints, supporting their positions with typically contradictory information, which is often derived from “reputable” sources. Thus, the struggle to determine what true knowledge is and

when it is attained in the age of social media is a topic begging to be more thoroughly considered and analyzed from a philosophical perspective.

A considerable and looming concern is that there are now less-reputable websites that create sensationalized stories, typically taking actual events and altering them in ways that will draw in more viewers and website or page “clicks.” Such sites are frequently the reference tools of more radical Facebook users, whose goal appears to be to attain the self-affirmation and excitement they feel in posting a contradictory story or shocking development. It seems that in purveying even false “knowledge,” there is gratification for many in the affirmation and reinforcement they absorb from their likeminded, similarly biased online communities. Even worse, those online communities, due to the first viewing of these sensationalized reports originating within their trusted group or community, oftentimes accept the content as fact, without investigation. In this way, many in society seem to be staring at virtual walls of shadows when interacting with their social media communities, as they are accepting the views and opinions expressed therein as factual, and believe they have attained knowledge, without prior reasonable consideration, and despite having a large amount of contrary and useful information available to them. This lugubrious situation prompted epistemologist Karen Frost-Arnold of Hobart and William Smith Colleges to ask, “If anonymity makes it easy for agents to lie, makes it difficult for audiences to judge the competence of the speaker, and prevents us from providing real-world punishments for those who undermine epistemic practices, then, so this concern goes, the internet provides a poor medium for the production and dissemination of knowledge.”^{xvi} This being the case, these recurring online phenomena

seem to entreat philosophers to hearken the cries of a confused, microcosmic social media world.

Socrates asked Glaucon to consider the following scenario, wherein one of the prisoners within the Cave is allowed some access, albeit limited, to the truth of their reality:

Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he'd say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what *is* and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass by, were to compel the man to answer his questions about what they are? Don't you suppose he'd be at a loss and believe what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?^{xvii}

It seems that many social media users are similarly “dazzled” and limited in what they can perceive, but for very different reasons than the prisoner in the Cave, suddenly allowed and compelled to stand up, to “walk and look up toward the light.”^{xviii} Perhaps such users are so dazzled by the massive scope of information available to them through the internet, social media, and the plethora of available options afforded by modern science and technology, that they, as Socrates suggests the prisoners in the Cave would,

reject that abundance of information, choosing instead to believe in a reality that is familiar and represented within their social media groups. Therefore, they are not unlike the prisoners in the Cave – “such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.”^{xix} Whereas the shadows in the Cave represent a false perception of reality, of truth, and knowledge founded on what is empirically observed, the regular deceptions by friends (“dazzlers” within one’s social media community) and less reputable websites on social media represent the same for reality. They lead many to what could be termed unjustified false beliefs – false beliefs held by users, mistakenly believing they have attained knowledge, due to their implicitly trusting faulty/false information provided by a certain group or media source. This indifference towards knowledge, towards consideration regarding those things users digest on social media, is harmful for multiple reasons, foremost amongst which might be that regular social media users seem, less and less often, able to sort truths from falsehoods when viewing online content.

Therefore, many users have unintentionally skewed their perceptions of reality. They choose the less trying path to understanding, as just as the prisoner in the Cave experiences distress and annoyance when being dragged by force towards the light of the sun (truth, knowledge), making sense of such a vast quantity of available information – and reasoning based upon that information to a place of understanding and true knowledge– can be annoying, distressing, and challenging. That truth coupled with the massive array of deceptive and dazzling information regularly and consistently propagated across the internet and within social media sites and groups, renders many out of their depth of reasoning, seemingly incapable of deciphering truths from falsehoods.

Thus, perhaps due to hubris, or simply an innate human appeal to believe empirical evidence, or perhaps something as simple as indolence, such users will not accept aid, or allow themselves to be dragged towards the light. Like the prisoner who is dragged and finally reaches the light, they are overwhelmed. “And when he came to the light, wouldn’t he have his eyes full of its beam and be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true?”^{xx} Just as the prisoner’s eyes are so full of light that he cannot see, these users have access to so much information and truth that they choose to limit their perception to what is easily and readily available to them. Intimidated by the idea, or perhaps incapable of the process of considering, deciphering, and reasoning through such an expansive sum of data, as well as the patience, reflection, and at times grief and mental agony involved, they choose their virtual, illuminated walls of shadows in the form of accepting the perception of the world as presented within their social media communities.

Once this path is chosen, social media niches are carved, and insulated groups of likeminded individuals accept and disseminate misinformation as knowledge. These groups act as metaphorical incubators and echo chambers wherein ideas, beliefs, views and information are given a space to grow and develop, and are amplified and given special credence within the group, based upon repetition of the view and preconceived biases and notions regarding the view within the group. The members of such online cliques rely almost solely on similar, if not identical news and information sources. In this way, such communities can become psychologically powerful enforcers of rumors and misinformation, as those within the group intuitively trust information supplied by

and within the group, far more than that of even reputable outside sources. In this way, critical discourse as well as reasoning is limited, and false knowledge is propagated.

Taking this into consideration, it becomes clear that the epistemic and psychological threats posed by social media are both abundant and intimately interconnected. That is to say that the epistemic breakdown of many users, to the point of accepting the views of their internet niches as knowledge, as opposed to challenging the perspectives, due to the difficulty of wading through the internet sewer of contradictory information, fake news, and paid-per-click websites, as well as oftentimes sources that are considered “reputable,” can result in a psychologically controlling situation, wherein the user, due to the emotional and mental stress of the processes described, gives over their power to reason and consider, to some degree, to their insulated group. More concisely, due to the complexity of reasoning to a place of “knowledge,” based upon many negative and contradictory factors, individuals are allowing a sort of group reasoning to replace their own individual power. The epistemic difficulties presented by the internet and social media are adversely affecting the psychology of users, which in turn is causing an epistemic breakdown of the user.

Of course, just as in Plato’s dialogue, prisoners of social media do occasionally escape the Cave, in the sense that they are particularly struck or influenced by an idea or explanation, and thus step away from the metaphorical chains of their social media ideologies. They take in the world, have conversations, research, are challenged to reason on a particular topic, and upon occasion adapt their views, gaining (or at least taking steps towards) true knowledge and understanding. Like Plato’s prisoner out in the world, they are compelled to return to the Cave, to share their newfound knowledge with

their community – “When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time, don’t you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?”^{xxi} Unfortunately, the response of such social media groups is typically quite similar to that which Plato reasons would be the response of the prisoners left behind in the Cave – castigation, chastisement. No matter how well reasoned, or the evidence presented for a view, a calamitous effect of the sheer expanse of information modern technology has made available is that counter-views, as well as evidence (whether real or contrived) are rarely in short supply. And although it seems contrary to any form of reasoning, the psychological sway and strength of preconceived notions, biases, and an ingrained perception of the world, or the cumulative effect of psychologically driven epistemic breakdowns, or perhaps simply apathy on the part of other users within the group, seem to mitigate the thrust and power of nearly any view to which the group is collectively opposed. Further, within the structure of social media, castigation is easier than ever. If one’s views disagree strongly with those of another, one can simply “unfriend” the offending party, or even less directly, they can choose to “unfollow.” Unfollowing is the practice of placing a user on a list of users that one will remain “friends” with from the perspective of the offending user, but the content and views of whom they will no longer see within their personal social media feed or community. In this way, users are easily able to “get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up”^{xxii} towards the light, simply by unfollowing, unfriending, or blocking any whose views differ from their own; thus, limiting the propagation and attainment of knowledge, thereby corrupting our perception and understanding of reality.

If it can be agreed that the process of searching for and discovering truth, via the consideration of empirical data combined with sound and thoughtful reasoning, thus resulting in the attainment of justified true belief – knowledge – is in all cases a good and just goal, and to the benefit and wellbeing of society as a whole, then it should be clear that social media as it is commonly used today is in many ways detrimental to the aim and purpose of that goal, and thus to the wellbeing of humankind. The parallels which can be drawn between how countless users interact within social media, and the prisoners within Plato's Cave, act as signposts of this detriment. They are symptoms, indicative of humankind's attenuated grasp, weakened relationship with, and wavering predilection for justified, reasoned, true knowledge. As many delve further away from the light of knowledge, fooled perhaps by a different kind of light – from a computer, tablet, or smart phone screen – they simultaneously descend into a Cave very much like that which Plato described, seat themselves in front of virtual walls of shadows, and fasten their shackles.

FOUCAULT ON BENTHAM'S PANOPTICON: Visibility as a trap and how social media is regulating our behavior

The Panopticon is a style of institutional building, designed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and first proposed in his *Panopticon; or The Inspection House* in 1787. “The concept of the design is to allow all (*pan-*) inmates of an institution to be observed (*-opticon*) by a single watchman without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched.”^{xxiii} The design consists of a semi-circular structure with a central point, a house or tower from which a single individual, presumably a guard, officer, or in the case of a hospital perhaps a doctor or floor manager, can see all of the inmates simultaneously, as the inmates are housed around the perimeter of the semi-circular structure. The possibility of a doctor being at the central point is mentioned as Bentham conceived the idea as being applicable to hospitals, schools, nursing homes, mental health institutions, essentially anywhere he believed a large number of people could be more easily controlled by the constant reminder that they are possibly being surveilled. His primary focus, however, was on developing the design as a superior alternative and means of control (and because he viewed it as economically sensible) for prisons. “A Circular, or Polygonal Building, with cells on each story in the circumference; in the centre, a lodge for the inspector, from which he may see all the prisoners, without being himself seen, and from whence he may issue all his directions, without being obliged to quit his post.”^{xxiv} (see Figure 2). He further described it as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example.”^{xxv} As Bentham explained, due to the design of the Panopticon prison, the inmates would be constantly unsure whether or not they were being watched by the

surveilled. Foucault claims that the prisoners will eventually act this way at all times, as they will adapt to the idea that they are possibly being watched at any moment, and thus even once they are released, will still act as if they are within the Panopticon and possibly being watched – a regulation of behavior that would evidence true change. This “is the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”^{xxviii}

To effectively apply Foucault’s ideas concerning the Panopticon to social media today, one need only to alter the flow and structure of the concept, making it reciprocal. This perception, the “Social Media Panopticon” (SMP), features the user at the center of a circular structure, representative of the encompassing effect of the internet and social media, with the entire network that their privacy settings allow to view their profile, postings, pictures, videos and so forth, possibly watching at any moment. Within the structure of Facebook’s Privacy Settings, the options for “Who can see your future posts” are: Public (which allows for anyone on or off of Facebook to view one’s profile and content); Friends (one’s Facebook friends can view their profile and content); Friends except... (which allows for one’s friends, except for those friends one specifically selects to hide their profile from, to view one’s profile and content); Specific friends; Only me. Although it is difficult to find accurate and up-to-date data concerning the preferred privacy settings of verified private Facebook accounts, it is apparent that the vast bulk of accounts opt for the “Friends” or “Public” options. As of 2013, only twenty percent allowed for public viewing, with the trend leaning strongly towards increased privacy. More current estimates project that greater than ninety percent of all accounts on Facebook choose the “Friends” privacy setting.^{xxix} Thus, in the vast bulk of cases,

wherein the “Friends” privacy setting has been selected, one’s Facebook profile and content can be viewed by anyone within one’s accepted group of friends and acquaintances at any time. In the case of the “Public” privacy option being selected, one’s Facebook profile and content can literally be viewed by anyone with or without a Facebook account. Whereas in the case of the Panopticon, the inmates are constantly unsure whether they are being watched by one select individual (the guard, who by virtue of being in a centralized tower has access to all views and can thus potentially see all of the inmates), in the case of the SMP, the user would be constantly unsure whether they were being watched by any user within their network (it follows then that the user could be watching any other user within their network), and depending on the user’s privacy settings, potentially a much broader audience (anyone with internet access (See Figure 3)).



Figure 3. Social Media Panopticon
(Privacy setting: “Friends”).

 - Accepted Friend/Acquaintance of user.

Bentham considered the Panopticon an enlightened and rational solution to a societal problem, built upon the simple core belief, “that power should be visible and unverifiable.”^{xxx} Visible, meaning: “the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is being spied upon.” Unverifiable: “the

inmate must never know whether he is being watched at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.”^{xxxix} The Panopticon reduces group collectivity and reinforces the power of the authorities that have implemented social structure and control. Within the structure of the social media model, the SMP enforces the power of the group (the user’s network) over the user. In this way, those operating within the SMP become self-oppressed, uncertain whether they are being watched at any moment, but aware that it is a possibility. As Foucault puts it, “The inmates (are) caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.”^{xxxix} In the most common privacy setting, “Friends,” a user’s profile and actions are visible to their network at any given moment, and in that way the SMP is made evident. Timothy Rayner, a self-described digital philosopher, and Honorary Research Associate in Philosophy at the University of Sydney, explains “We are both the guards and the prisoners, watching and implicitly judging one another as we share content.”^{xxxix}

Though the mechanism in the SMP case differs from that of Bentham’s original Panopticon design, the SMP nonetheless functions effectively. In the case of Bentham’s design, a single individual is able to monitor and control many. In the case of the SMP, control is increased in direct proportion to the number of users able to see one’s social media posts. In both cases, Foucault’s summation remains intact – “Visibility is a trap.”^{xxxix} As in the case of the Panopticon, the SMP also (and perhaps even more effectively) arranges “unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.”^{xxxix} However, whereas the Panopticon works by spatially distributing a specific population, the SMP does so by virtually distributing a specific population. In

both cases, the user is consistently at risk of being under surveillance, the result of which is similarly effective functionality.

Foucault died before the explosion of the internet and social media, but it is safe to assume that he would agree that within the SMP, the “major effect” of the Panopticon model, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”^{xxxvi} not only holds true, but may be amplified significantly by the reciprocal nature of the SMP, the possibility that anyone within one’s network could at any moment be watching, and the astounding number of social media-ready devices being used regularly. Foucault likened the prisoners within the Panopticon to actors on a stage, “They are like so many stages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.”^{xxxvii} It is the contention of this paper that the SMP is in many ways damaging, as it ultimately amounts to a forfeiture of individual autonomy; that inherent within the SMP Effect, in which users know there is a strong likelihood that they are being watched at nearly any moment of the day, is a change in the user’s behavior, in ultimately adverse ways. The comparison to stage actors becomes even weightier, “Just as actors on stage know they are being watched by the audience and tailor their behavior to find the best effect, effective use of social media implies selecting and framing content with a view to pleasing and or impressing a certain crowd.”^{xxxviii} Thus, in accepting the hallmarks of social media and operating willfully within the SMP, considerable pressure is placed upon the user to forfeit their individual autonomy, foregoing the capacity to act as one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one’s own, and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces.

Just as Foucault argues that prisoners within the Panopticon will eventually regulate their behavior to satisfy the rules of the institution in which they are imprisoned, social media users, having the knowledge that they are quite possibly under surveillance at any time when they are interacting online, will present a “best version” of themselves. Social media users are, after all, both the guards and prisoners, constantly watching one another, implicitly judging, and as Foucault suggests, regulating their behavior to satisfy and impress their watchers. Metzler and Scheithauer explain, “Some adolescents in our study may have expressed their ideal rather than their actual self.”^{xxxix} Further, just as Foucault suggests that the prisoners within the Panopticon will regulate their behavior to such an extent that they will act as if they are being surveilled at all times (even after being released from prison), many social media users will eventually act both within and out of their chosen social media platform as if they are at all times within it and possibly being watched/judged (at minimum, when interacting in the real world with members of their social media communities). Therefore, their actions will become disingenuous a large part, if not all, of the time. This behavior is detrimental. Even when acting outside of their chosen social media havens, such users will regulate their behavior as if they are still within their SMP, as if they are being consistently watched and judged. There would, of course, be occasional evidence of users watching in the SMP, in the form of “Likes,” shares, comments, and so forth, just as Foucault’s actors would obviously be able to view the faces of many in the crowd. However, one would typically never know whether, or by whom they were being viewed and followed. Thus, most social media users are living within a virtual world in which they are being habitually watched, and

often without knowing who is watching. Therefore, the pressure to regulate behaviors and present a “best version” becomes even more psychologically daunting.

The concept of “sharing” on social media is the device through which users can project their unique perspectives and the “selves they wish for others to perceive”^{xli} upon the world. Sharing is the act of selecting which thoughts, comments, pictures, news stories, texts, videos and so forth one wishes to share within their network or to their entire social media platform, or the internet as a whole. One merely clicks a button and disseminates their chosen content virtually and simultaneously. Sharing is universal and basic across nearly all social media platforms. We share knowing that we are doing so amongst our pre-selected and accepted friend base, and in doing so, “sharing is a performance, to an extent – a performative act, an act that does something in the world.”^{xlii} This is important, as “The performative aspect of sharing shapes the logic and experience of the act itself.”^{xlii} Sharing occurs for a wide variety of reasons, but most pertinently as a means of encouraging a specific image or idea of how others perceive the sharer, thereby fostering the perception others have of the sharer in a specific and calculated manner. That being the case, sharers are capable of designing and shaping ideal versions of themselves, which ultimately results in a skewed perception of the sharer by those who view their account and content. Where the dynamic of sharing begins to effect real world perception, as opposed to a social media affront, is when the user goes out into the real world amongst friends and acquaintances. It is only natural, after all, that if one presents a certain image or ideal of one’s self online, that they must continue to present a similar, if not identical version in reality, leading to disingenuous, and therefore less meaningful relationships. Foucault would argue that this is the

Panopticon Effect at work, that the conscious and permanent state of visibility is assuring the automatic functioning of power, that the social media user is acting as both prisoner and guard.

Herring and Kapidzic explained, “As adolescence is a period of physical changes, including sexual development, teenage girls were found to present themselves more seductively in profile pictures than boys did in teen chat-rooms (e.g., wearing only underwear).”^{xliii} Teens, attempting to present what they feel is the ideal version of themselves, are being willfully disingenuous, as evidenced by a Pew survey indicating that “56% of American adolescents with online profiles have posted false information on social media.”^{xliv} Herring and Kapidzic posed a rather jarring question in a section of *Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media*, entitled “Visual Self-Presentation,” asking “Other cases are less clear: Are 12-year-old-girls who post ‘slutty’ pictures of themselves on Facebook intending to advertise themselves as sexually available, or are they just imitating media and their peers (presenting what they perceive to be an ideal version of themselves)?”^{xlv} In considering such a question, one can easily begin to see the inherent problem: if the 12-year-old-girl presents herself as such within her SMP, and then meets a boy or girl outside of their shared SMP, in the real world, she may well feel pressured to maintain the image she has propagated, and thus may act well outside of her true comfort levels.

Of course, thinking of the social media experience as a SMP, it is easy to view online sharing as always being a way of “playing to the crowd.” After all, given the intense need to satisfy possible watchers, the value of what social media users share increases dramatically. Our network, the “crowd,” “consumes the content that we share

and, if we are favoured, it passes it on. The crowd honours the identity that we create by sharing this content.”^{xlvi} This affirmation, of course, leads to further affirmation-seeking self-regulation. Indeed, this deep need for recognition is consistent amongst social media users, and comes in many forms.

Sharing online is not solely a matter of self-affirmation and self-creation. For many people, the sharing impulse stems from a sincere desire to empower and inform their tribe and communities. We may be genuinely committed to getting the word out, or passing the word along, or just playing a part in keeping the conversation going by commenting on or liking what others have shared. The point is that whatever action we take, we make a personal statement in doing so: ‘*I affirm this; I share it; I like it*’. We speak to a crowd of our personal preferences, and we like nothing more than for the crowd to affirm those preferences in return.^{xlvi}

Thus, even when sharing for the sake of our “tribe and communities,” we still psychologically enjoy and crave the affirmation of our peers, and in time, that affirmation still regulates our behavior and eventually pressures users to present themselves in a less than authentic manner.

The fine print in the search for social media affirmation is of course that the “crowd” is, or at least can be, preselected to a considerable degree, and that the user is often performing within an individually crafted, secured environment. “No doubt this

satisfies a deep psychological need for recognition... it draws us back to share and share again.”^{xlviii} One may make the argument, “Social media isn’t confining us or backing us into a corner, viewing it as a SMP proves that. We are performing for a huge crowd.” However, we often aren’t. The audience may be large, but so long as one’s settings do not allow for public viewing, the group as a whole is an approved clique, a bubble of fellow like-minded users for whom the user chooses to perform. This is nearly universally true across platforms, with Twitter being the closest to an openly public, widely-used platform, but even within the “Twitterverse¹,” one’s 280-character-or-less thoughts, messages, and responses are limited initially to one’s “Followers,” but can then be seen and shared openly from that point forward. Typically, a user’s friend list represents a tiny slice of humanity that views the world similarly to the way the user views the world, and who would overall be far more likely than any random population sampling to have ideals similar to those of the user.

Others still might object,

“But if the SMP theory is true, and we put forth ‘best versions’ of ourselves at all times, because social media has become an apparatus encouraging and psychologically embedding self-regulating behavior, wouldn’t that be a good thing?”

¹ Twitterverse is social media jargon used to describe the collective number of members of online social media network Twitter. The twitterverse refers to all Twitter users, regardless of their gender, location and overall activity/tweets on Twitter. The twitterverse is also known as the twitosphere or twittersphere. Retrieved on 17 September, 2017: <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/29186/twitterverse>

Social media users appear to be structuring their profiles to give the appearance of being “better” than they really are, which distorts the perception of the user’s reality by those viewing the profile, and to some degree, of the users themselves. If that attitude and mode of action were carried into the real world, genuine relationships would cease to exist. People the planet over would be regularly, and in many cases outlandishly, disingenuous with one another, thus limiting true relationships and the ideals that lead to trust in society. Those ideals would instead be replaced with veritable shadows upon the wall, and social media users would be nothing more than prisoners transfixed and controlled by the glow of their screens, incapable of genuine action, thought, or autonomy – both within and outside of social media interactions. Life would be without real trust, thought, consideration, love, and so forth – those things which are typically thought to attribute meaning.

NOZICK’S EXPERIENCE MACHINE: How social media and status quo bias shape our experiences of ourselves and the world around us

In the late Dr. Robert Nozick’s “The Experience Machine,” Nozick questioned, “What matters other than how people’s experiences feel ‘from the inside’?”^{xlix} In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham claimed that “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do.”^l He went on to explain that pleasure “is the only good,” aside from “immunity from pain.”^{li} Taking Nozick’s question with Bentham’s view, one might conclude that Bentham would answer Nozick with an explanation that suggests that since pleasure is the only good, and pain something to be avoided at all costs, little to nothing else matters other than how experiences feel “from the inside.”^{lii} Nozick follows up this question by posing the following thought experiment:

Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neurophysiologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? [...] Of course, while in the tank you won’t know that you’re there;

you'll think it's actually happening. [...] Would you plug
in?^{liii}

Online polls conducted by Yahoo! Answers^{liv} and The Student Room^{lv} indicate that the large majority of respondents would not plug into The Experience Machine. However, I would argue that through an analysis of social media, the plausibility that many in fact would plug-in, particularly if given the option to “test it out,” seems apparent, due to the fact that they are seemingly already displaying a desire to do so, and in a strong sense in some cases are already doing so presently. That is to say, they have created their own virtual realities online, escaping into them for long periods of time, checking in on them frequently through mobile devices, and attempting through the vast array of regulatory options, to perfect them. Although this is admittedly a long leap from Nozick’s “super-duper neuropsychologists” and Experience Machine, it does seem a strong indicator that subconsciously many of us psychologically yearn for an escape, a more perfect and satisfying existence, be it virtual or not.

Nozick offered three reasons not to plug into the Experience Machine.

- 1) “We want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them.”^{lvi}

This is persuasive, as “in the case of certain experiences, it is only because we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we’ve done them.”^{lvii}

- 2) “There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has been long in the tank.”^{lviii}

People have characteristics; we are each individuals with certain character traits. “Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving?”^{lix} Nozick makes a compelling point in explaining that not only do we not know the character of those floating in the tanks, but there is no way for them to have any real character. “Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob.”^{lx} Without actions and experiences, there is no way to know what someone is “like,” as “nothing about what we are like can matter except as it gets reflected in our experiences.”^{lxi}

- 3) Plugging in limits us to a “reality” that is only as deep as that which man can construct. “There is no *actual* contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated. Many persons desire to leave themselves open to such contact and to a plumbing of deeper significance.”^{lxii}

Plugging in ensures that one literally never does anything in their life. Doing so limits one to, as Nozick puts it, the state of being an “indeterminate blob.”^{lxiii} Those who plug in seem to be, therefore, neither intelligent nor ignorant, good nor evil, prosperous nor failures – in some ways they are no one and nothing, as they have never done anything of value, or for which they can claim true responsibility (Nozick goes so far as to describe plugging in as “a kind of suicide”^{lxiv}). As Kurt Vonnegut wrote in *Deadeye Dick*, “To be is to do – Socrates. To do is to be – Jean-Paul Sartre.”^{lxv} In either formulation, the sentiment seems to hold true. Nozick is suggesting that many wish to maintain contact with reality, to experience things and live a life that they know, in as much as they can know, has value and meaning in the real world.

While many consider Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment to make a strong, if not conclusive case for the idea that pleasure is not a sufficient goal in life, that although we do pursue pleasure, we would not want to spend our lives in simulated pleasure, strong counter arguments exist. Noted Harvard psychologist and philosopher, Joshua Greene, exposed the notion of status quo bias in considering Nozick's Experience Machine, providing a reformulation of the experiment in reverse form:

You wake up in a plain white room. You are seated in a reclining chair with a steel contraption on your head. A woman in a white coat is standing over you. 'The year is 2659,' she explains, 'The life with which you are familiar is an experience machine program selected by you some forty years ago. We at IEM interrupt our client's programs at ten-year intervals to ensure client satisfaction. Our records indicate that at your three previous interruptions, you deemed your program satisfactory and chose to continue. As before, if you choose to continue with your program you will return to your life as you know it with no recollection of this interruption. Your friends, loved ones, and projects will all be there. Of course, you may choose to terminate your program at this point if you are unsatisfied for any reason. Do you intend to continue with your program?'^{lxvi}

Making use of Greene's reformulation, and using his students as guinea pigs, Felipe De Brigard of the Duke Institute for Brain Sciences found that when given Greene's example, the majority preferred to stick with their current lives, despite the knowledge that they would be living out life within a simulation. It is my contention that Brigard's experiment was accurate, and that many reading Greene's reformulation will feel differently about it than they do Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment. Brigard tells us that feeling differently about the version he offers, as compared to that of the one Nozick offers, is due to status quo bias. After all, there seems to be an implicit assumption in Nozick's reasoning that the reason people can't simply desert their lives must be related to an innate desire to stay in touch with actual reality. However, it seems just as, if not more plausible that perhaps they are emotionally, psychologically, and reasonably biased towards the life and reality they know and with which they have a deep-rooted experience and connection. In this way, Greene's reformulation, his reverse experience machine example, is quite effective in showing that the status quo actually matters more to people than knowing that their perceived reality is the actual "real reality". The Wachowski siblings, in writing the screenplay *The Matrix*, summed it up with their character Cypher, who when offered the opportunity to have an important life as a powerful person within the Matrix simulation, as opposed to returning to reality, said:

You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy, and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.^{lxvii}

Adam Kolber suggests we consider it thusly:

Imagine an investment banker with no relatives, working for twenty-five years with little or no job satisfaction. Her only pleasure in life is to come home after a twelve-hour work day and read passages from Zen Buddhist philosophers. In fact, she's come to believe that her life would be much better if she used her considerable wealth to move to Asia and study Zen Buddhism. Though she could have reason to believe that such a life would be better (given whatever conception of good she has), she does not necessarily feel comfortable with such a drastic life change.^{lxviii}

Kolber's example illustrates that although most people at some point feel there are paths in life that might be preferable, or might lead to greater happiness, we often do not test those paths as the prospect of doing so seems drastic and frightening. The fear of plugging into the experience machine would be even greater, as at least in Kolber's scenario, the woman would be operating within the same reality and could presumably go back to the life she left behind, or a similar one, if she found the outcome of her decision less than desirable. In cases wherein we feel we could make ourselves much happier or fulfilled by taking actions to lead different lives, most of us will opt to not take the risk, most of the time, as the status quo and the comfort of staying within the lives we know and understand is too powerful to challenge.

Much like in the case of the SMP, wherein virtually the population of the developed world has slowly been seduced into the position of accepting that they are being regularly watched and judged, and have thus subconsciously changed their behavior on social media, and as Foucault suggests, in public, social media users the world over have been slowly choosing an experience machine consistently for some time. Although we have not willingly agreed to the terms of a contract, or been asked directly whether we would like to enter the machine, we have each gradually, through an osmosis-like process, chosen to remain within and assimilate with the conditions, behaviors, and customs of social media.

Suppose there was a virtual community, split into thousands if not millions of tiny factions, each an echo chamber of beliefs and ideas, wherein those who wander in with differing ideas are regularly chastised, and wherein the information exchanged is sometimes quite inaccurate. You could gain a strong sense of identity within your own virtual community faction, but at the cost of being judged and often chastised by those outside of your close-knit community. Similarly, you would be able to judge and chastise those who disagree with your community. Super-duper computer scientists could build such an encompassing website and app that you would use it daily to chat with your group, read news, and be inundated with the views of others, as well as pictures of children, pets,

vacations and food. You would become so enamored with this technology and virtual community that you would fundamentally alter who you are, in order to make the best impression within your chosen group, and over time, would gradually change who you are outside of the cybernetic group, in the real world, in order to emulate the person you are perceived to be within your virtual community. Would you join?

The answer seems obvious. Everyone should decline. However, in reality, social media crept slowly into most of our lives, gradually taking power over us, influencing our choices and behavior. Most do not even know it has happened.

Taking Greene's counter example with Brigard's study, as well as Kolber's example, into consideration with Foucault's view concerning "Visibility (as) is a trap,"^{lxix} the seemingly common view of Nozick's Experience Machine, that the majority would choose not to plug-in, becomes murky at best. Foucault's idea that the Panopticon induces within prisoners a feeling of perpetual and penetrating visibility and thus assures the "automatic functioning of power,"^{lxx} due to eventual self-regulation, paired with the realization that the SMP has an almost identical effect, causing social media users to self-regulate their behaviors, seems to imply that the view that most would not plug-in may be mistaken. Although perhaps many would choose not to plug-in, given the options "Plug-in" and "Do not plug-in," when viewed more broadly, and taken from the perspective of Greene's reversal, it seems that status quo bias plays a major role. Taken

together, it seems quite plausible (some might suggest obvious) that the combination trumps Nozick's theories concerning the natural desire to do certain things and not just have the experience of having done them, or of an individual's desire to know what they are actually like ("outside of the tank" or any simulated/virtual program), or with the individual being concerned that they are being limited to a "reality" that is only as deep as that which man can construct. In fact, given Greene's reformulation of the question, it seems both obvious and overwhelming.

Certainly, the combined contentions of Greene and Kolber render Nozick's reasons not to plug in to the Experience Machine as questionable at best – far from absolute. The idea that "We want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them"^{lxxi} is called into question when one considers Greene's reformulation (reversal) of the thought experiment. Whereas Nozick states that we want to do things, not just experience them, Greene's reformulation, combined with Brigard's findings, indicate that due to the force of status quo bias, in the case that what we currently perceive as reality is actually an experience machine or simulated program of some sort, the majority would prefer to continue within it, due to it being comfortable, familiar, and tested. This is directly contradictory to Nozick's reasoning, as his view that people can't abandon their lives due to an innate longing to stay in touch with reality seems, in the bulk of cases, incorrect.

Nozick's second argument is disputed in much the same manner. "There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has been long in the

tank.”^{lxxii} This point is far less persuasive in light of Greene’s reversal reformulation and Brigard’s analysis and experiment. Given the results, this point is not rendered as incorrect, but instead as perhaps “without value,” given that Brigard’s experiment makes clear that many simply are not concerned with this reasoning, bending again to status quo bias. Nozick argues that people should not plug-in, and would not do so, as “nothing about what we are like matters except as it gets reflected in our experiences.” Again, Brigard’s experiment and Greene’s reasoning that the bulk will lean toward the status quo seems accurate. Whether considering Greene’s reversal reformulation, Brigard’s experiment, or Kolber’s example, most will portend that experience is experience, regardless of how it is obtained. Whether through a realization based upon reasoning, or out of fear of abandoning the comfort of what they know and understand – status quo.

Nozick’s final bit of reasoning, that “There is no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated. Many persons desire to leave themselves open to such contact and to plumbing of deeper significance”^{lxxiii} again pales when considered in light of Greene’s Experience Machine reversal, Brigard’s experiment and Kolber’s example. Those exposed to Brigard’s experiment leaned heavily toward remaining within the simulation, content in the experiences and depth of their known reality, and satisfied once again to lean comfortably upon the status quo. Kolber’s example only confirms the existence and power of status quo bias.

However, in exposing the existence and power of status quo bias, it becomes clear that for many the only factor keeping them from pursuing what they truly desire in life is

akrasia – a weakness of will, preventing them from doing something that perhaps might improve their lives or overall human experiences. This detrimental behavior, to choose the social media experience machine, is perpetuated by the ingeniously designed and implemented characteristics of social media – clearly quite appealing, and in many cases addictive, for users. The individual regulatory abilities afforded to users are, seemingly, a massive draw. The ability to exist within a virtual world that we have each individually crafted and tailored for ourselves, according to our personal, professional, and psychological needs and desires is a nearly undeniable temptation. Users regulate the news they see, the people who are allowed to comment on their views and statuses, and what pictures and posts individuals and groups can view. In these and countless other ways, users can regulate their experiences online. They can view and be viewed selectively and in whatever manner they find most flattering for themselves personally, as well as for their preconceived notions and worldviews (much like “selecting your life’s experiences,”^{lxxiv} only within the SMP, as opposed to the tank). Nozick is not wrong that we ought not choose the experience machine. We ought to choose not to plug in and instead make efforts to live the lives we desire within reality. That so many of us have chosen the social media experience machine is not proof that Nozick is incorrect, but that status quo bias, akrasia, and the power of many small gradual acceptances over time can lead to incredibly significant, controlling, and detrimental consequences. The majority of the population of the developed world has chosen an experience machine, but that doesn’t mean we wanted, or consciously intended to do so.

Social media is an experience machine. Instead of “super-duper neuropsychologists” stimulating our brains, however, computer science geeks,

programmers, and in some cases hackers, have developed a reality that is alternate to our own, but real within, and by virtue of Foucault's arguments, over time, even away from, itself. Users, not just those with Internet Addiction Disorder² or selfitis³, but typical social media users, have made it both integral to their lives, and have allowed it to shape and control who they are as humans beings, to their overall detriment.

² The American Psychological Association (APA) has made it public that Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) will be considered for "inclusion in the next version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)," as "Problematic computer use is a growing social issue which is being debated worldwide. Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) ruins lives by causing neurological complications, psychological disturbances, and social problems."² "Surveys in the United States and Europe have indicated alarming prevalence rates between 1.5 and 8.2%." (Cash, Rae, Steel, Winkler. Internet Addiction: A Brief Summary of Research and Practices. Nov, 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480687/>)

³ 'Selfitis': Due to a hoax article published in March of 2014, by the Adobo Chronicles, claiming the APA had officially recognized 'selfitis' as a mental disorder, the term has become popular as a way to describe those obsessed with taking pictures of themselves with their smart devices. Though first published as a hoax, the article spread quickly across social media, was accepted as true, and has now lead to a great deal of actual debate on the topic. Adobo Chronicle article: <https://adoboChronicles.com/2014/03/31/american-psychiatric-association-makes-it-official-selfie-a-mental-disorder/>

Objections

If social media demonstrates anything unmistakably, it's that there will never be a shortage of objections in the world. Whether accurate, based on FAKE NEWS!, or entirely nonsensical, the sheer number of objections on social media to even the most demonstrated of facts is baffling. For example, typing the words "Flat Earth" in the Facebook search bar yields the following results: "Flat Earth," which is listed in the category of "Teacher" and has 88,000 likes; "The Flat Earth Society," which is listed as an organization and has 100,000 likes; "Flat Earth Society," listed as a "Non-Governmental Organization" has 21,000 likes; "Flat Earth Research," a "Community" has 31,000 likes. There are literally dozens more, including "The Flat Earth Revolution," which has 32,000 likes and has as its logo an altered NASA logo, with the letters "NASA" replaced with "LIARS." Despite the pseudo-science and "research" such groups will offer, it has been known that the Earth is round since the time of the ancient Greeks. Pythagoras proposed the Earth was round around 500 B.C., and Anaxagoras reasoned quite scientifically that the earth was round by using the shape of the Earth's shadow on the moon during a solar eclipse as evidence.^{lxxv} Of course, today we have actual images of the Earth taken from space, and have literally sent astronauts into space, who have orbited the Earth. Yet, Flat Earth communities still exist, and their members shout in all capital letters inside their echo chambers, convinced that they know better than science and reason, or that we have all been tricked by NASA and/or the government. Thus, objections are expected and welcome, but all will never be answered or agreed upon. The following are those which are expected to be most ostensibly and

regularly brought to bear, and which have not been responded to elsewhere within this paper.

“Within the section on Plato’s Cave and throughout the Foucault section, you are making too big a deal about the adverse effects of social media on human beings and the idea that it is skewing our perception of reality. You’d do well to remember that all our perceptions are effected and mediated by cultural mores, traditions, environments, and modes of communication, and that none is more or less important than any other.”

Perhaps you have heard of the Marshmallow Experiment, wherein a researcher puts a young child in a room with very few distractions and then places a single marshmallow on a table in front of the child. The researcher explains that the child can either eat the single marshmallow, or if they can wait just a little bit while the researcher leaves the room, they will bring them back another marshmallow, so the child could then have two. It’s a famous experiment, but not because what I just described is that interesting, although it is to a degree, but because the researchers followed-up with the children through their adolescence and into adulthood. What they found was that the adults who were patient enough to wait for the second marshmallow were more successful, better educated, had richer relationships, and even lower Body Mass Indexes than those who wanted instant gratification and ate the marshmallow.^{lxxvi}

By now you are probably asking, “How on earth does this relate to the objection?” To state it simply: the raw data on social media usage, as well as smart device usage, indicates something unlike reading a book, or being influenced or biased by the content of the television programs you were allowed to watch as a child, or stories you were

told, or the music you listened to, and so on and so forth. Most would agree that those things did not decide the person that is your true self. Perhaps the following will be viewed as an overreaction, perhaps as technophobia, but social media alone (not a combination of factors, as would have been the case prior to SM) is shaping who we are as people. It is depriving us, by slowly creeping further and further into our lives, of our ability to control our lives, and as has been said throughout this paper, to our detriment. It is the only single factor that has ever been capable of doing so alone, and that makes it quite dangerous. Were there a way to, ten years from now, objectively measure the progress of individuals who used social media regularly, as compared with those who did not, it is not hard to imagine the results would be similar to the famed Marshmallow Experiment, with the non-regular users performing better than the regular users. The issue is more complex than it may seem, which is why this paper was written.

“But why does it matter whether one source or many influences us? Isn’t social media just as good as the combinations of sources that influenced people before social media existed?”

To put it bluntly, no it is not. As Juan Pablo Bermudez explains in “Social Media and Self Control: The Vices and Virtues of Attention”:

Several studies suggest that high levels of social media engagement are associated with lower academic performance, especially in heavy multitaskers. The more people tend to multitask between using social media and studying, the worse they do at the latter. And the harmful effects of social media seem to go further than that: a recent study found that people were worse at exercising self-control after five minutes of

browsing Facebook than after five minutes of browsing CNN.com. In comparison with the CNN group, those in the Facebook group were more likely to eat an unhealthy snack over a healthy one (thus showing they are more likely to succumb to temptation), and tended to persist less in a difficult task (thus revealing they tend to be distracted or give up more easily). Researchers conclude that, ‘the effect of social network use on individuals’ abilities to exhibit self-control is concerning, given the increased time people are spending using social networks.’^{lxxvii}

Aside from decreased academic performance, people who frequently use sites like Facebook and Twitter have also been found to struggle at controlling their attention in general. In other words, people who regularly use social media are more distracted people in general.^{lxxviii} Thus, as a single controlling source, the way it is presently used by the vast majority, social media certainly will not lead humanity down its best or most productive path.

“Isn’t this claim about social media really just pedaling technophobia about a relatively new technology?”⁴”

Although fear has historically been a common response to new technologies, and although social media is still relatively new, the motives for the research and efforts that have gone into this paper are not fear based. There is certainly a concern that if users continue using social media in the way that we have to this point, the long-term effects will be (and have been) detrimental overall. However, what this paper should represent is not the suggestion of abandoning social media altogether, but rather a warning of the

⁴ “Technophobia (from Greek τέχνη technē, "art, skill, craft" and φόβος phobos, "fear") is the fear or dislike of advanced technology or complex devices, especially computers. Although there are numerous interpretations of technophobia, they seem to become more complex as technology continues to evolve.” Retrieved October 19, 2017: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technophobia>

effects social media can have on one's life overall. Thus, it could also be viewed as a recommendation that users take the time to reflect upon and consider the time they spend on social media, and then alter that time to partake in a more meaningful, worthwhile experience.

“There are a lot of good things about social media. It can be an amazing tool for communication, it gives everyone a voice (even those who feel powerless), social media has helped to raise awareness and billions of dollars for worthy causes, it provides an amazing outlet to reach and influence young minds, and has literally countless other positive applications.”

These are all true, along with literally millions of other amazing benefits related to the structure, capabilities, and opportunities social media affords. In fact, focusing on the positive aspects of social media presents perhaps the most elegant possible solution to many of the issues of social media, including the “visible trap,” as Foucault would put it, of the SMP. Taking steps to distance themselves from their niches, their online communities of likeminded individuals, and not shouting in all capital letters within their virtual echo chambers, by instead concentrating the approximately two and a quarter hours per day (and rising) average users spend on social media on the positive aspects and potential of the various platforms (charitable organizations, causes that help people, academic niches designed for learning, and millions more) offers a prodigious solution.^{lxxix} The irony is that users would still be trapped within the SMP, which seems inevitable if one is to remain a regular social media user. However, the eventual outcome of their social media usage, and the person they would become both within and outside of

social media, would be a far more positive individual and influence on the world around them than the alternative. Although the obvious solution is to avoid social media, to delete accounts and cut ties, given how imminently ingrained social media is throughout the developed world, and thus for sake of pragmatism, becoming a more positive person and worthwhile influence both while using social media and while shaping one's real world community seems an excellent, if not superior alternative. This solution represents two marshmallows.

"It seems that short of giving up social networking altogether, we will always be stuck in some sort of SMP. If that is the case, how are we to avoid being in the position of those in the cave, rejecting the report of the returned escapee?"

This is a crucial question, as in the case that one continues to regularly use social media/networking, one will, due to the structure of modern social networking, inevitably be under the watchful eyes of one's SMP. Thus, the avoidance of becoming like those chained in the cave is important, as to not do so is tantamount to willfully choosing ignorance over knowledge. In order to do so, one must remain vigilant, open-minded, and reasonable when considering both their own views and those of others. It is also in one's best interest to avoid being too much involved in niches within social networking sites. Instead, one should focus more so on the positive aspects and potential of the various platforms (charitable organizations, causes that help people, academic groups and pages designed for learning, and millions more) that modern social networking supports. More than anything, being aware of the potential of becoming like those chained in the cave rejecting the reports and views of the returned escapee, and being mindful to be

considerate and reasonable in taking into account the views of others, whether ultimately agreeing or disagreeing with them, is key to avoiding that fate.

“Given that in Nozick’s explanation of The Experience Machine, those within would be allowed to exit every two years and ‘have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years,’ couldn’t participants simply request a series of experiences that would form their characters in certain ways? In other words, couldn’t their time within the machine have the same (or very similar) virtue- (or vice-) building effects as real world experiences?”

Our intrinsic worth and moral character are linked to something beyond what the Experience Machine could possibly provide us. Nozick explained in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* that, “A person’s shaping his life in accordance with some overall plan is his way of giving meaning to his life; only a being with the capacity so to shape his life can have or strive for a meaningful life.”^{lxxx} One plugged into the Experience Machine cannot shape their life or strive to give it true meaning; they can only pretend to do so, and this is (should be) simply not good enough for rational beings. Human beings have the unique ability and capacity to imbue our lives with meaning via our self-conscious actions.

One might object here:

“But the choice to have character building experiences within the Experience Machine is a self-conscious action and choice, is it not?”

True, but said choice or choices are singular (or at the very least limited) actions, occurring at an interval of every two or so years. Upon being programmed into the Experience Machine, there are no further choices made or actions taken. One is, as

Nozick explained, “an indeterminate blob,”^{lxxxix} taking no actions, feeling no real stress or pressure in making difficult character-building decisions. The meaning and character that we possess in this life are the result of our self-conscious decisions, our convictions in facing true-life (not pre-programmed virtual life) difficulties and true character-building moments, and acting forthrightly and consciously. The true character and worth of a person could never be determined within the Experience Machine, as one within the machine makes no true character-building decisions. Nozick summed it up well: “There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has been long in the tank.”^{lxxxii} Not only do we not know the character of those floating in the tanks, but there is no way for them to have any real character.

Conclusion: Choose reason

In 1784, Immanuel Kant wrote “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” in which he urged us to think for ourselves, instead of relying on the minds of “self-appointed guardians of the multitude.”^{lxxxiii} Kant argued that it wasn’t an inability to think clearly that prevented the majority of the masses from embracing their own autonomy, but rather the inability to overcome their own laziness and cowardice. He offered the following: “Have the courage to use your own understanding.”^{lxxxiv} Today the challenge of thinking for one’s self persists, as the obstacles and pressures have multiplied substantially. Social media has taken the power to influence from the “guardians of the multitude” and handed it to the masses. Those masses are reactionary, heavily biased, and sometimes suffer from “mob mentality.” Thus, in the heat of the moment at the outrage of the day⁵, those characteristics can sometimes become the status quo. As this cycle repeats regularly enough, many are drawn to this mode of thinking on a regular basis. This is just one example of the millions of paths users can take to choosing the wrong experience machine – a bad experience machine. In doing so, an overall negative SMP follows, as the majority within the specific bad experience machine community will be likeminded, and eventually, through Foucault’s theory of self-regulation, these negative characteristics (being reactionary, biased, and prone to “mob mentality,” among others) will begin to leak into, and eventually consume, one’s life away from social media, in reality. Eventually, one is left staring at a wall of shadows, trapped in a machine they never wished to be a part of in the first place.

⁵ Outrage of the day: With such extensive connectivity across the world and the nearly instantaneous manner in which news spreads and social media is updated about the issues of the day, the “outrage of the day” seems to literally change daily (and sometimes even more frequently). It describes the issue causing the most uproar online each day.

There is a preposterously gargantuan amount of positive influence, impact, and real world contributions that can come from using social media. It can be a vice or an avenue of self-improvement. The super-duper computer geeks have truly outdone themselves. Choose wisely, choose positivity, have the courage and patience to step outside of your echo chambers, and choose to employ reason.

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