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Selfhood in the Age of Selfies: Considering Social Media as an Extension of the Arendtian Social

Maeve McKaig
Bard College, mm2072@bard.edu

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by

Maeve McKaig

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This is how I imagine my experience on social media: lying in bed; blue light flooding my face; my eyes looking dull and transfixed on the screen, in a sort of stupefied daze as I scrutinize my own Instagram profile. I am asking myself questions as I scroll in an attempt to view my digital self from an outside perspective. What do people see when they come across my online appearance? What kind of person is being drawn out of this combination of images and captions? Is this digital persona an authentic representation of me? These questions are partly focused on the superficial. I want to impress people with my curated little archive on Instagram. But in the back of my mind, I am also hoping that the answers to these questions will help me understand who I am and my position in the world.

In the past I have thought of social media as another way to be seen. I used to see social media as potentially liberatory, especially in times when I did not feel seen in real life (or alternatively, when I did not like the way I was being seen in real life). Even if I was too shy to talk to someone at school, maybe they would see me on the Internet and notice me. The Internet was another outlet for disclosing myself to the world, and I understood my presence online to be an extension of my presence in real life. Social media also gave me access to social groups beyond my own, and exposed me to new culture and personalities. The "endless possibilities" of the Internet has been written about at length, but I doubt the expansion of one's reality into the virtual world can be overstated. When I started consistently using Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr in middle school, the Internet became a refuge for me. In classic adolescent fashion, I would seek comfort in seeing my interests being talked about online when people in real life didn't "get" me. Suddenly I didn't have to put so much pressure on my real life interpersonal

relationships that felt precarious and stressful, because the Internet seemed to offer plenty of alternative, parasocial relationships. I came to rely on these Internet-based, parasocial connections less and less as I grew up, but social media remained in my life as a way to sustain interpersonal relationships irl.

I'm writing this introduction in the spring of 2021, having spent over a year living through a global pandemic that continues to unfold. COVID-19 forced the world into lockdown, and drastically altered the ways in which we could relate to each other and the world. Before the pandemic, I had accepted that I was presenting a curated version of myself on social media. But the isolation of quarantine forced me to interrogate what that really means. Suddenly it felt like my digital self was the only "me" that really existed, especially since I wasn't physically appearing before anyone else besides my family. Looking back, I realize that for arguably most of the people in my online social networks, that was always the case. For people I didn't see often in real life, whatever image they had of me only came from my Instagram profile. But once all of my social interaction became virtual in quarantine, I had to confront the idea that my existence consisted of my online appearance. I found myself putting more and more pressure on my digital self, because cultivating it was my only channel for having my existence recognized and confirmed by other people. I found myself returning to social media as the only way to be seen.

This is how I remember my heavy reliance on social media during the beginning of quarantine. The pull I felt toward my phone and social media platforms (primarily Instagram and TikTok) was a desire for connection. In this case, "connection" mostly amounts to simply seeing other human beings, perhaps a subconscious reminder that other people do exist and that our world is still turning. This was especially true when scrolling through TikTok. The constant

motion of Tik Tok's For You Page reliably and mindlessly carried me along a constant stream of content; flooding my senses with waves of images and sounds that would quickly fade from my memory. But, as anyone connected to social media could tell you, what begins as casual consumption quickly devolves into "doom scrolling." Suddenly it's 5 am. Eyes burning, thumb cramping; I just cannot stop scrolling. I can see the time going by, and I can feel my brain and body begging me to stop. But I also feel panic building, and the panic is ultimately more convincing. I have wondered where that panic comes from, and why it drives "doom scrollers" to cling to this thoughtless, monotonous practice. I think there must be fear about what happens when we stop scrolling. Behind the panic lies the anticipated discomfort of confronting what will be harder to ignore once we stop distracting ourselves.

While I was more active in consuming content on TikTok in isolation, I was more active in posting content and communicating with people on Instagram. I was not only on the app more, but posting more, too; both regular posts and Instagram stories. It is hard to describe the feeling that being active on Instagram gave me; the experience of receiving notifications, checking on likes, noting comments. Part of me wants to call it joy, pleasure, even relief. But another part of me knows that the feelings I'm trying to describe are just chemical rushes to my brain. I know that these apps were designed to get me addicted, like slot machines at casinos. But I still felt connected going through notifications and comments; and I think it brought me happiness, even if that happiness was manufactured, a bit shallow, and ultimately fleeting. Quarantine was a time of idleness, and there was a busyness to posting an Instagram story and attending to messages that was satisfying to me. Quarantine was also a time of isolation, and scrolling through Instagram was soothing in a way because it reminded me of other people's existence.

But this practice eventually spiraled. I felt like my brain was becoming programmed to be constantly oriented toward posting on social media. It was like my brain, hooked on the dopamine social media rewards Internet users, screened everything I saw or did first to determine whether my current situation was exploitable enough to warrant an opportunity to post. There would be moments when I found myself viewing myself as I went through my day. Before deciding to do something, I ran it by this observing ego, the part of me that judges as if my life is being displayed on the observing ego's feed, to see if it was worth doing. Even in solitude, no matter how far my phone was out of reach, it felt impossible to find relief from my internalized publicity. I still felt like I was always "on," and that became suffocating.

Now I'm not on Instagram much, if at all. I had to leave the app in order to shut out the light of potential publicity that was seeping into my brain. A big lesson that came out of quarantine was that my existence is valid without other people's approval. Or, put another way, the Internet does not have to witness what I'm doing in order for it to matter. But reading the work of Hannah Arendt, especially *The Human Condition*, made me doubt my conclusions on appearance, visibility, and existence. Arendt says that our appearance is our existence; that I cannot determine the meaning of my life because it is created in the stories people tell about me. And in the age of social media, I wonder whether the stories people tell about my online presence are somehow more legitimate than my life offline. My digital self is "seen" by more people, and it creates its own archive through automatic documentation. If my control over my digital presentation allows me to create my own stories, what does that mean for my relationship to appearance in real life?

The way Arendt made me doubt my understanding of appearance and social media motivated me to pursue these questions in my senior project. I will be using some fundamental

concepts from Arendt's theory to frame my analysis of appearance, self-knowledge, and political action on social media. Per Arendt's understanding of reality and the human condition, the plurality of humanity and the common worldliness of things grants us a sense of place in the world. We appear before one another and observe each other; engaging with the world of things we hold in common. By seeing and interacting with the same material world, we confirm our sensation of reality. And in telling stories about what we see and experience, we create lasting narratives that are incorporated into our conception and understanding of reality. But Arendt believes that the transition to modern society, what she calls "the rise of the social," isolates and atomizes the individual, and that negatively affects our ability to confirm and understand reality.

I find that Arendt's understanding of the social contains many parallels to how the contemporary world has been subsumed by social media. As a virtual space, social media abstracts individual agency by incorporating selfhood into bureaucratic and market-like structures, which makes us further doubt reality by distorting the temporality of appearance. Doubting reality leads to thoughtlessness, and proliferates a general susceptibility to illusion. In this project I hope to show that social media is not a healthy public realm that supports the disclosure of human identity and political discourse. Rather, social media creates a pseudo public realm that distorts our understanding of reality and ourselves. Engaging with the digital space as if it were a public realm ultimately impedes our ability to act as both individuals and citizens.

In addition to Arendt's theory, I will be drawing on the respective analytical work of Seyla Benhabib and Hanna Pitkin. Arendt's work is rife with generalizations and complex schemas (which is somewhat part of the appeal). Benhabib and Pitkin both attempt to wrestle with some of these inconsistencies. In *Situating the Self*, Benhabib picks apart Arendt's understanding of public space and further details the ways in which one appears in public.

Benhabib is concerned with how Arendt's model of public space dictates who is admitted to appear in public, and cautions against what this means for society as it expands in the modern age. In *Attack of the Blob*, Pitkin attends to Arendt's conception of "the social." Pitkin finds a tension in Arendt's portrayal of the social as an autonomous alien force moving in on a seemingly helpless and passive humanity, because that initial reading conflicts with the otherwise liberatory and active tone of Arendt's work. Pitkin describes this take on the social as "the Blob," and uses the science fiction film as a metaphor for the rise of the social. In confronting "the Blob," Pitkin identifies how markets and modes of thought contribute to the social in order to illuminate potential ways out of it.

I often remind myself of how Arendt prompts her readers to "think what we are doing" in the Prologue of *The Human Condition*. I find this task to be powerful in its simplicity; Arendt simply asks us to stop and think. She argues that the bleak outlook of modern society is perpetuated by continued thoughtlessness. When we get caught up in the social, it becomes harder and harder simply to stop and think. Arendt's prompt was originally directed at readers in the late 1950s, in a society expanding so rapidly that suddenly humanity was no longer bound to Earth and had developed the capacity to destroy itself. Reading and writing about Arendt's work in 2021, the prospect of "thinking what we are doing" remains a challenge. As I write this, we continue to weather a global pandemic that seemed to pause everything. What better moment to stop and think than mandatory lockdown? But even confined to our private residences, how could one simply "stop and think" amidst the surrounding chaos? How could one step away from the workings of the world, even for a moment? I think there is a parallel between life during COVID-19 and Arendt's understanding of the individual living under the social in that we have been forced into isolation, and therefore rely on increasingly abstract forms of connection. This

is the challenge of Arendt's prompt. Under the social (and, as I hope to show, on social media and the Internet), an attempt to "think what we are doing" reveals the endless ways we are connected and attached to abstract technical systems, and how seemingly impossible it is to break out of those systems. This project is my attempt to "think what we are doing" when we engage with social media as a virtual space of appearance, and question how we might be able to act outside of those spaces.

Chapter 1

In the following chapter, I will establish a foundation in understanding how we appear in the world, and how appearance has been impacted by the rise of modern society according to Arendt. I will examine how Arendt conceptualizes the space of appearance; how the public space stands in contrast with the private realm; and finally, how the "rise of the social" and its resulting paradoxes affect the ways in which we appear in the world. I hope to show that the rise of the social, although one of Arendt's more opaque concepts, negatively impacts the individual's ability to appear in the public sphere. According to Pitkin, the rise of the social traps the individual into what Pitkin calls the paradox of modernity. That is, under the rise of the social, the individual is confronted with problems that are seemingly beyond their control, despite the fact that the development of technology and economic markets has seemingly increased human faculty on a massive scale. The rise of the social not only impacts one's ability to take action (action being one of Arendt's fundamental concepts of the human condition), but also one's desire to do so. Pitkin also depicts how the social acts as an isolating and atomizing force for the individual. The result is thoughtlessness, conformity, and a detachment from reality. By thoroughly reviewing the immediate implications of the social in Arendt's work, I am preparing to put those implications in conversation with the contemporary social media age. Chapter 2 will consider appearance in the social media space in order to show that social media is an extension of the social in the negative Arendtian sense: a pseudo public realm that distorts the functionality of both the public and the private.

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Some preliminary definitions: Plurality, Natality, Action, and Power

While the goal of this chapter is to discuss appearance in modern society, it is necessary to begin with some definitions. Engaging with Arendt's theory requires a general understanding of how she conceptualizes reality. So much of Arendt's work builds on fundamental concepts of the human condition, and Arendt is adamantly purposeful and intentional in defining those concepts. Specifically, it is important to establish how the human condition is informed by Plurality and Natality; the relationship between Action and Power; and finally, the significant distinction between the Public and the Private, which is distorted by what Arendt calls "the rise of the social." All of these concepts interact in Arendt's understanding of appearance.

Arendt believes that the human condition is informed by Plurality and Natality. The condition of Natality means that each person is born a distinct someone. You are distinctly you, and no one else. When you appear in the world, and show the world who you are through speech and action, you are disclosing your distinct natality. Through speech and action, you actualize your natality and exist as a distinct historical appearance in the grand scheme of humanity. Arendt says that natality is specifically who you seem to be in the eyes of history. Natality is not the soul, or some idea of an internal self. Rather, we disclose our distinct natalities by showing the world who we are. Natality informs the human condition because it makes the extraordinary possible. That you were born a particular, distinct "you" that is different from everyone else is extraordinary; it defies statistics. Thus, the uniqueness of natality creates the possibility for things to be otherwise. Furthermore, we do not exist alone in our natality. The condition of Plurality describes the whole of humanity as distinct natalities unfolding together and being conditioned by each other. Plurality simply means that we are not alone in the world; men (not Man) inhabit the world. To exist in the world is to be among men; to die is to cease to be among

men.[1] Because of natality and plurality, humans are conditioned by living among each other and holding the world in common as a collection of distinct someones. Thus, Arendt says, humanity is united by difference.

Action, which Arendt identifies as one of life's fundamental activities, corresponds to the conditions of natality and plurality. For Arendt, action is the only activity that occurs person to person, without the mediation of things. We disclose who we are through action. Thus, action corresponds with the condition of plurality because you cannot disclose your natality without the presence of other people observing you. One cannot "act" alone. Action is also inherently bound to two predicaments that Arendt says are inherent to the human condition: unpredictability and irreversibility. We cannot know how an action will unfold into the chaos of the future, and we cannot take back that action even if there are negative consequences. Furthermore, we cannot control how our actions will be perceived by others. With every action, we commit ourselves to deeds that cannot be changed and propel ourselves forward into a future we cannot predict. This tension comes with appearing in the world.

Appearing in the world and showing the world who you are is a resource that generates power. According to Arendt, power is generated by the plurality of humanity realizing their distinct natalities. In other words, power is generated by people coming together and engaging with each other in speech and action. People gathering together and engaging with each other as distinct natalities generates political power that has the potential to found something new. This is why, for Arendt, natality is the central category of political thought. She sees life and politics as a series of beginnings, with the potential for action carried by each moment.[2] Accordingly, because one cannot act alone, isolation negates both action and power.

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[1] Arendt draws this definition from the Roman use of "to live" and "to be among men," or "to die" and "to cease to be among men" as synonyms, *The Human Condition*, 7-8.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9.

Arendt's theory of "the rise of the social" attributes the flattening of modern society to the domination of the social realm, or "society." "The rise of the social" describes how in modern society, there is no distinction between the public and the private realms; rather, everything is brought into the "social" realm without distinction. The distinction between public and private is important to Arendt because she sees the separate realms and their corresponding activities as a way of protecting one's distinct natality within the plurality of humanity. Under the social, domestic issues enter the same realm as political issues. The social turns to government and economics to manage all aspects of life, which Arendt sees as a threat to natality. She argues that the prevalence of the social realm leads to conformity and isolation. Once everything is brought into the social there is no room for reflection or spontaneity. We are isolated and encouraged to conform. Furthermore, the constant activity of the social keeps us from breaking out of its cycles. Our capacity to generate political power and create change is reduced. Thus, according to Arendt, the rise of the social is detrimental precisely because it stands in conflict with plurality and natality.

All of these concepts in Arendt's work inform how we come to understand and engage with the plurality of humanity, and the material world held in common. In the Prologue of *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes, "Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves."[3] It is only through interacting with each other that humans are able to experience meaningfulness. I take this to imply that the promise of "meaning" that Arendt wishes to recover for modernity can be drawn from the ways in which we appear before one another, and how we engage with each other and the world around us. This basic thread in Arendt's work–that one must turn their focus outward to the world and the plurality of

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[3] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 4.

humanity rather than retreating into the isolating ego–is important to begin with because it reminds us where Arendt places value when considering the human condition: meaning comes from people engaging with each other and the world in an effort to start something new. These are the concepts and threads woven throughout Arendt's work that have informed my approach to this project.

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Appearance

In *Life of the Mind,* Arendt says that appearance is existence. She writes, "In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*."[4] That is, we cannot exist without also appearing. Therefore, in order to understand how appearance creates meaning within the plurality of humanity, it is worth beginning with how we appear in the world. Arendt uses the fact that humans appear in the world to infer that we are meant to be seen and perceived. Appearing and being seen is what we have in common with the world of things. Appearing in the world requires recipients of that appearance. For Arendt, recipients mean living creatures that have the ability to perceive and recognize what appears before them. Arendt's understanding of "the worldliness of living things" conceptualizes that every subject is also an object. We both appear as a subject, and are observed from another's perspective as an object. Appearing as an object else guarantees that "objective" existence. Arendt says that existing as both subject and object is how we confirm what is real. She writes, "What we usually call "consciousness," the fact that I am aware of myself and therefore in a sense can appear to myself, would never suffice to guarantee reality."[5] Rather, we require others to see what we see and touch what we touch in

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[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 19.

[5] Arendt, *Thinking,* 19.

order to confirm reality. This is the condition of worldliness. In the following passage, Arendt

describes how common worldliness guarantees our sensation of reality;

> In a world of appearances, filled with error and semblance, reality is guaranteed by this three-fold commonness: the five senses, utterly different from each other, have the same object in common; members of the same species have the context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning; and all other sense-endowed beings, thought perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agree on its identity. Out of this threefold commonness arises the sensation of reality.[6]

We confirm our sensation of reality through interacting with the world around us and seeing

other people do the same.[7] This is why the public realm will be so important in Arendt's

discussion of the social. Arendt argues that without a distinct public realm in which we can

appear and engage with each other, we lose the ability to confirm reality. With the rise of the

social, although we still appear before each other, it is under conditions of a distorted public

realm that does not support common worldliness.

In linking appearance with experiencing a sensation of reality, Arendt notes that an "urge

toward self-display" seems to be common to living things in the world.[8] For Arendt, the urge

toward self-display is more than life preservation or sexual attraction. She writes;

> [T]he predominance of outside appearance implies, in addition to the sheer receptivity of our senses, a spontaneous activity: whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched. It is indeed as though everything that is alive–in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others–has an urge to appear, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its "inner self" but itself as an individual.[9]

In other words, we want to be seen. We feel an urge to appear because this is how we confirm

our reality–by having our distinctness as individuals recognized by the plurality of humanity.

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[6] Arendt, *Thinking,* 50.
[7] Arendt specifies the *sensation* of reality because it is the feeling of reality, and it is unclear whether we can know reality itself.
[8] Arendt, *Thinking,* 21.
[9] Arendt, *Thinking,* 29.

That recognition informs how we learn to understand ourselves and our place in the world. Arendt posits that this is perhaps because "Both the world and men stand in need of praise lest their beauty go unrecognized."[10] And because the world and men need praise, both need spectators to observe, perceive, and recognize excellence and distinction.

Arendt says that spectators play a crucial role regarding the human condition because they create unifying narratives for humanity. In perceiving the world and telling each other about it, spectators create meaning through remembrance and storytelling. The role of the spectator complements the act of appearing in the world because each person occupies both roles in the space of appearance. Arendt notes the function of temporality in this process, writing, "The meaning of what actually happens and appears while it is happening is revealed when it has disappeared; remembrance, by which you make present to your mind what actually is absent and past, reveals the meaning in the form of a story."[11] Meaning cannot be attained in the present moment of something happening. Rather, telling a story about what appeared and what happened gives form to meaning and creates a narrative that can be shared. Even after things have disappeared, the narrative and meaning remains. Again, Arendt minimizes the role of the individual in creating meaning. The plurality of humanity, most notably the historians and storytellers, collaborate to create meaning. Arendt writes;

> The man who does the revealing is not involved in the appearances; he is blind, shielded against the invisible, in order to be able to "see" the invisible. And what he sees with blind eyes and puts into words is the story, not the deed itself and not the doer, although the doer's fame will reach the high heavens.[12]

Because no one can tell their own story of their appearance in the world, one relies on the plurality of humanity to observe, record, and sustain the narrative of one's life. This element of

[10] Arendt, *Thinking,* 132.
[11] Arendt, *Thinking,* 133.
[12] Arendt, *Thinking,* 133.

Arendt's conception of appearance will influence later discussions of how social media has expanded the ability to create our own narratives. Through social media, we continue to rely on the spectators; but the Internet shifts the relationship between appearance, spectatorship, storytelling, and temporality.

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Thought

While appearance is existence, Arendt says we cannot be out in the world all of the time. The mode of appearance must be balanced with the mode of thinking. Arendt understands mental activities to be confined and isolated in the mind, which means that thinking requires "a withdrawal from the world as it appears and a bending back toward the self."[13] For Arendt, thinking forces us to turn inward to confront ourselves. In thought, we engage in a reflective dialogue with ourselves that allows us to critically consider whether our appearance in the world actually reflects who we understand ourselves to be. In this way, thinking is just as crucial as appearance when it comes to understanding the self and one's relationship with the rest of the world. Without the reflection accessed through thought, one is left to constantly present themselves in the space of appearance. This leads to "thoughtlessness," which Arendt says contributes to the failures of modern society.

While appearance and spectatorship can confirm a sense of reality, Arendt also says that thinking itself can make us doubt that sensation.[14] This is because thinking keeps us from appearing in the world at the same time. Because the activity of thinking cannot be represented to other people in real time, there will always be at least a moment of delay switching from engaging in critical thought to engaging with the space of appearance. Thinking and appearance

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[13] Arendt, *Thinking,* 22.
[14] Arendt, *Thinking,* 49. "It is precisely the thinking activity–the experiences of the thinking ego–that gives rise to doubt of the world's reality and of my own."

cannot occur simultaneously. Withdrawing from the world and "bending back toward the self" would not be an issue if we were simply spectators, but Arendt says we appear in the world to do more. She writes;

> However, *we are of the world and not merely in it*; we, too, are appearances by virtue of arriving and departing, of appearing and disappearing; and while we come from a nowhere, we arrive well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us and to take part in the play of the world.[15]

Here Arendt is saying that we cannot exist solely through the experiences of the thinking ego. She rejects the idea of completely retreating into thought and joining the philosophers on their search for eternity. In Arendt's view, the life of the philosopher loses a crucial part of the human condition: that you are not merely in the world, but of the world. Arendt is more interested in being a part of the human narrative and assuming a role in "the play of the world."

Therefore, appearing in the world must be balanced with thinking. You cannot be out in the world all the time; but you also cannot completely withdraw from appearance and only think. Rather, one must look inward and engage in reflective dialogue with oneself in order then to appear before the world (and vice versa). Appearance informs thought, and thought informs appearance.

As distinct and separate activities, appearance and thought are confined to particular locations. Appearance and spectatorship require the presence of other people out in the world. Alternately, one cannot engage in thinking while in the light of the space of appearance; thought can only occur when you are alone with yourself. Thus, appearing and thinking are connected to distinct realms of human existence, which Arendt identifies as "the public" and "the private," respectively. This distinction between appearance and thought as activities explains the distinct yet related functions of public and private spaces.

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[15] Arendt, *Thinking,* 22.

Arendt draws the distinction between public and private realms of human activity from Greek political theory. In Greek thought, there is a direct opposition in life between political organization in the public realm, and domestic association in the private realm. The structure of the Greek city-state reflected this separation between public space (*polis)* and the home (*oikos*). In the *polis,* political matters were decided through discussion and persuasion (as opposed to force). The household and the family (*oikos*) was reserved for life-sustaining activities. The distinction between public and private reflected the fact that each citizen belonged to two realms of existence and led two lives; one public and political, one private and personal. In the next section, I will unpack the specific functions of these spaces in order to show how the relationship between the public and the private contribute to one's understanding of reality and their place within the world. These definitions are important to establish before moving on to social media as a virtual space of appearance because, as a pseudo public realm, social media combines and distorts different elements of both the public and the private.

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Publicity: The space of appearance

The space of appearance is where we disclose our unique natality to the world. In *The Human Condition,* Arendt writes that the public space of appearance comes into existence wherever people come together by way of speech and action. However, the space of appearance is not necessarily nor permanently established.[16] This gathering of people creates the *potential* for political action. Therefore, the only precondition for politics is people gathering together and engaging with each other. (This supports Arendt's theory of plurality as the essential human condition.) Arendt says that people gathering together to create a space of appearance gives the material world a purpose and a context through speech, action, and storytelling. She writes;

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[16] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

> [T]he human artifice, [...] unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate raison d'être. Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object; without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of nomad tribes.[17]

The space of appearance is what allows us to engage with the world and each other; it is what allows us to participate in storytelling, and thereby create and preserve meaning in the human artifice we hold in common. In this way, the space of appearance supports the web of human relationships because it is where we disclose identity and talk to each other about the world. Without talking about the world and confirming reality in the presence of other humans, we would lack meaning. And because power actualizes the space of appearance into existence, power preserves the public realm and secures the possibility of continuing the human artifice. Therefore, in Arendt's view, appearance is the precondition for everything we understand to be a part of human life. This fundamental significance of appearance will be important when interrogating the Internet's implications on appearance.

There are different functions of public space contained in Arendt's definition, which Seyla Benhabib notes in *Situating the Self*. Benhabib says that Arendt's model of public space can be regarded through two distinct lenses: "agonistic" space and "associational" space. Though Arendt does not make this distinction herself, Benhabib's analysis finds that there are different characteristics and purposes within each understanding. "Agonistic" and "associational" spaces serve different aspects of appearance, natality, and politics. In unpacking Arendt's understanding of public space, Benhabib worries how Arendt's distinctions having to do with exclusivity and what is "allowed" in public discussion create an unnecessary barrier to expanding the public realm to include marginalized voices and identities. Benhabib instead advocates for a more

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[17] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 204.

inclusive public realm that is adaptable to modern society while still supporting the basic aspects of appearance and political discourse.

The "agonistic" model of the public realm creates a space of appearance in which human excellence is revealed and displayed.[18] In establishing this definition, Benhabib draws on Arendt's understanding of the Greek *polis*: public space is meant to "multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to how in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness."[19] The "agonistic" space of appearance is where humans actualize their distinct natality by disclosing their individual identities, and compete for recognition in hopes of distinguishing themselves within plurality as extraordinary.

The agonistic space is the realm in which individuals, confronting the futility of human action in the face of mortality, seek security in death by having stories told about them. When we disclose our natality to the world, hoping to be recognized for our individual particular selves, we create a historical appearance. Each particular historical appearance encapsulates how someone was seen by the plurality of humanity. Arendt says that establishing one's natality within the narrative of history is how we confront mortality. Natality is distinct and unique; but mortality, its opposite, is uniform. Having stories told about us and creating a historical narrative is an attempt to protect our individual natalities from mortality's oppressive uniformity. Arendt writes, "the *polis* was for the Greeks, as the *res publica* was for the Romans, first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals."[20] As the space in which human excellence is revealed and distinguished, Benhabib's "agonistic" space creates conditions

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[18] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 93.
[19] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 197.
[20] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 56.

that allow narratives to begin to form. The aim of appearance in "agonistic" space is to create a narrative that lasts after an individual disappears from the Earth. The permanence of these narratives, if they survive the coming and going of subsequent generations, create the possibility for mortal heros to attain immortality, securing remembrance after death.

Benhabib's alternate reading of the space of appearance, the "associational" model, describes a space in which humans gather together to interact with each other.[21] "Associational" space is where power is generated by natalities unfolding together and informing each other. This definition draws from Arendt's belief that the possibility for the space of appearance to come into being exists wherever people come together by way of speech and action.[22] "Associational" space is where political matters can be addressed in public. Because the gathering of people creates the potential for political action, the "associational" model also shows how freedom can emerge in the public realm. For Arendt, freedom is positive. That is, it is a freedom *to* rather than a freedom *from*. Freedom in the public realm means the freedom to actualize one's natality and disclose your unique identity to the world.

Benhabib interrogates how Arendt moves between these two forms of public space, "agonistic" and "associational" space, in her general definition of the public realm. Benhabib attributes Arendt's indecision to her belief that public space is either defined based on the activity performed (action, as opposed to work or labor), or that the public sphere is distinct from other social spheres based on the substantive content of the discussion.[23] For Benhabib, the definition of a public sphere based on content is futile. She writes, "Even on Arendtian terms, the effect of collective action in concert will be to put new and unexpected items on the agenda of public

[21] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 93.
[22] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 199.
[23] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 94.

debate."[24] That is, the public agenda is bound to change and that is a good thing if it means

public discussion expands. Additionally, Benhabib notes that a definition of public space is more

concerned with procedure, rather than content. The "associational" model is definitively

procedural, and part of that definition includes how discourse takes place. Benhabib writes,

"What is important here is not so much what public discourse is about as the way in which this

disourse takes place: introducing the "dumb" language of physical superiority and constraint and

by silencing the voice of persuasion and conviction."[25] The public realm is reserved for

persuasion, not brute force. Arendt agrees with this point. For Arendt, violence and force is the

opposite of power. The use of violence to suppress political power and rational debate invalidates

this model of the public realm.

Benhabib also takes issue with bringing Arendt's understanding of the public realm into

modernity. She writes;

> The distinction between the "agonal" and the "associational" models corresponds to the
> Greek as opposed to the modern experience of politics. The agonal space of the polis was
> made possible by a morally homogenous and politically egalitarian, but exclusive
> community, in which action could also be a revelation of the self to others.[26]

A homogeneous, egalitarian (yet exclusive) space allowed for competition and rewarded

excellence with distinction. Whereas the Greek *polis* was able to function because of its

homogeneity, modern society has expanded to include multitudes of actors. For Benhabib, the

modern moral community is distinguished from the premodern by the fact that it has expanded to

include all beings capable of speech and action.[27] Benhabib views modern public space as

"essentially porous; neither access to it nor its agenda of debate can be predefined by criteria of

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[24] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 95.
[25] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 95.
[26] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 93.
[27] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 32.

moral and political homogeneity."[28] With the emancipation of various social groups into the public realm, public space and its agenda necessarily change.

Arendt and Benhabib agree that the transition to modern society admits the inclusion and recognition of previously excluded social groups. However, they disagree on the consequences of this expansion. Benhabib holds a different view of how the transition to modernity has altered the public realm. She does not problematize the extension of equality to a greater number of social groups. For Benhabib, the expansion of modern society to include previously excluded groups specifically forces public discussion to question collective conceptions of the self and the other now that former understandings have been challenged. She writes, "The struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom."[29] In Benhabib's view, this is a beneficial function of public discourse and positive for modern society. Arendt sees the same expansion of society as Benhabib, but argues that modern equality is merely the illusion of social equality. Arendt argues that this modern equality ultimately eliminates the possibility to make meaning of life (i.e. gain recognition and distinction) and leads to mass conformism. In making this argument, Arendt again refers back to the romanticized Greek *polis* in which an exclusive class of citizens competed against each other as equals for distinction.

Having reviewed Arendt's understanding of the space of appearance and Benhabib's concerns, I will conclude this section by presenting my normative conception of public space. I believe that a healthy public realm should house interactions that confirm one's sensation of reality, inform knowledge of self (both as an individual and as a citizen), create the conditions to start something new, and continue discourse through political persuasion rather than brute force. The purpose of the public space is to show the world who we are, to situate oneself within the

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[28] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 94.
[29] Benhabib, *Situation the Self,* 94.

plurality of humanity, and confirm a sense of reality. By seeing and hearing the same things, we confirm that we hold this world in common. The public realm is also where we disclose our identity to the rest of the world, and are recognized, in turn. This leads me to believe that the space of appearance should be a source of self-knowledge that counters and balances out the reflective dialogue we have with ourselves when we engage in thought. The space of appearance should be a way to enrich one's sensation of reality. The public space reminds you that you are a person, that you are in the world, and that you are also of the world, which means that you have the capacity to change it.

The public space is where we disclose our distinct identities to the world as individuals, but it is also where we engage with each other as citizens. Gathering together generates political potential. In entering the public space and engaging in speech and action, we are actualizing our political capacity as citizens. But the public realm is a space for political persuasion, not violence or brute force. I agree with Arendt that violence is not analogous to political power. Political change achieved by force rather than persuasion may be successful in founding something new, but violence will always sow doubt in the aftermath of that founding.

Lastly, I believe that everyone should have the freedom to enter the public realm. My understanding of equality does not get rid of competition or distinction in the public realm. Rather, everyone should have an equal opportunity to actualize their natality as both an individual and a citizen. This requires that basic human needs are met because, as Arendt and Aristotle will say, one cannot fully engage in the public sphere if they have not mastered necessity.

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Privacy: Blocking out the light of the public realm

Arendt says that although the private life and the public life constitute two separate existences, these two existences are connected because appearance and political organization in the public realm cannot exist without domestic association in the private realm. That is, the functions of the private realm allow for one to appear in the public realm. This is because Arendt believes that mastery of the private realm is necessary in order for the citizen to attain the "good life." Here Arendt invokes Aristotle's definition of "the good life," which means a life of freedom that allows one to enter the *polis* and engage in political discourse. By entering the *polis*, one exercises the freedom to actualize natality and disclose identity. The freedom of the "good life" is freedom from the constraints of necessity. Arendt writes; "[The "good life"] was "good" to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process."[30] The realm of the household sustains the biological needs required in order to appear in public and engage in political life.

In order to attend to all the things we need to survive, we must retreat from the spotlight of the public realm. In private, it is not necessary to maintain appearances, nor should it be necessary. The only focus of the domestic sphere is to tend to necessity and the continuation of life.[31] Without the private realm, life itself nor Arendt's (and Aristotle's) understanding of the "good life" would be possible. Therefore, according to Arendt, the household and the private realm exist for the sake of being able to attain the "good life" in the public realm.

In other words, Arendt says that the private realm exists for the continuation and maintenance of life, whereas the public and political exist for the organization of life. As much

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[30] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 36.
[31] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 30.

as Arendt is speaking to the function of politics, I think more importantly she touches on the function of privacy in human life. In Arendt's understanding of public and private space, privacy is a necessity, and I agree. The private realm should nourish and provide for fundamental human needs. It is reserved for maintaining life and attending to biological necessity. Arendt says that attending to these personal necessities and obligations–food, water, shelter, family–should not be a public matter. What I eat, my relationships, or how I raise my children should not be the business of the public realm. This is because we are each distinct individuals and we all need different things to survive. If biological necessity is vulnerable to the sways of public opinion, that would diminish the distinctness of natality.

      I also believe that there is merit to Arendt's distinction between thinking and appearance on a psychological level. That is, we cannot engage in reflective dialogue with ourselves if we do not have the private space to be alone with ourselves. While the public realm brings us into the plurality of humanity, only the private realm gives space to check in with ourselves. Privacy offers us space to gain perspective and sustenance that allows us to exercise the freedom required to enter and fully participate in the public realm. Therefore, the private realm should be secured and protected from the light of the public realm.

      However, Arendt's conception of the private realm does not bring freedom and nourishment to everyone, but only to the patriarch. Using the Greek city state as a historical model, Arendt argues that the private realm historically existed as a space of inequality so that members of the public realm could enjoy political equality;

> The *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only "equals," whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command of oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. Thus within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only in

so far as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals.[32]

The mastering of necessity in the household allows the citizen to exist as an equal in political discourse. In this way, the separation of the public and the private produced a form of equality that also allowed for distinction and recognition of human excellence. For Arendt, the equality of the political realm "was the very essence of freedom."[33] That is, to be equal meant to be free from the inequality that comes from being ruled. The rulership and inequality of the household allowed the *polis* to be "a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed."[34]

Arendt says inequality in the private realm allows for spaces of freedom to exist in the public realm. This arrangement, however, excluded slaves, women, and children from the *polis*. All members of the household besides the patriarch did not have the freedom to disclose their identity in the public realm, because their unfreedom is allowed the patriarch to be free. This is a point where Arendt and I disagree. Arendt's argument claims that the shadows of the private realm are necessary in order to hide unequal power dynamics because this inequality allows for political equality. And in doing so, Arendt clearly romanticizes the Greek notion of political equality and rationalizes the violent exclusion and oppression of women and enslaved people. The idea of a dominant patriarch who enjoys equality and privilege in the public realm while being free to exert power over the domestic space thankfully does not align with modern, more liberatory conceptions of equality. Modern society should stand for the liberation of all people, which necessitates bringing traditionally marginalized social groups out of the shadowy private realm and into an expanded public sphere while still securing private space for sustenance and reflection.

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[32] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 32.
[33] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 32.
[34] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 32.

I will conclude this section with my normative conception of privacy and why it is important. Like publicity, I believe that privacy is crucial to how we understand ourselves and the world around us. Privacy should also contribute to self-knowledge, as a way of checking in with yourself outside the context of the public realm. Privacy shields you from the light of the public realm. It offers seclusion and rest. Privacy is often defined negatively in this way as being removed from the public realm. And this is true, as privacy buffers the influence of the outside world. But I appreciate how Arendt's work portrays privacy as a positive, generative concept. Privacy grants us the space and time needed to reflect on who we are without being swayed by the tides of public opinion. In private reflection, you should be able to question what you believe and determine whether how you feel internally is accurately reflected in how you appear to the world. Without privacy, we become blinded by the light of the public realm. Without privacy, there is no outlet through which we can check the dominant opinions of the public realm, and it is too tempting to follow the herd and be lulled into thoughtlessness and complacency.

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The Social

Having laid out some of the respective values and functions of publicity and privacy, the next section will show how they are affected by what calls "the rise of the social." Arendt says that this distinction between public and private is subsumed by the rise of the social. The social brings the light of the public realm into the shadowy private realm. For Arendt, the social brings all human activity onto the same flat plane without distinction. The social, as a distortion of both public and private, attempts to complete the tasks of both the public and the private within the same system, but ultimately fails to do so.

Arendt says that the modern age, marked by the rise of the social, blurs the distinction between public and private by absorbing all life activities under the umbrella of "society." With the emergence and interposition of the "social" realm, there is no shadowy private realm where one can hide from the public realm's spotlight. Because both the public and the private are subsumed by the social, domestic matters are brought into the same realm as politics. Arendt writes;

> Since with the rise of society, that is, the rise of the "household" (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm, housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a "collective" concern. In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself.[35]

Whereas the household and family unit of the premodern private realm excluded certain activities from the public realm, modern mass society encompasses all activities without distinction. Here Arendt writes that the social resembles "the never-resting stream of the life process itself," in that one cannot step away or take a break from existing in the social because the social encompasses all of life's activities and is constantly changing and evolving.

The constant flow between public and private brings domestic matters into spaces that were once reserved for political matters. This results in the organization and maintenance structures of the household now controlling the *polis*. Arendt calls this the "rise of housekeeping."[36] As a result, the modern understanding of public and private is altered. Arendt argues that this is because "we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping."[37] This "administration of housekeeping" is what Arendt sees as the political form of the social realm: the modern nation-state. She writes, "the collective of

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[35] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 33.
[36] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 38.
[37] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 28.

families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family is what we call "society," and its political form of organization is called "nation.""[38] Modern mass society becomes one family unit; the nation state becomes a single household run by administrative bureaucracy.

In Chapter 2, I will put Arendt's model of the social in conversation with the rise of social media platforms in contemporary society. Arendt's model, though imperfect, contains many concepts and perspectives that I believe can be used to describe the functionality of social media as a public realm (or more accurately, its lack of functionality as a public realm). But first, it is necessary to outline those concepts: specifically, Arendt's discussion of equality and conformity under the social, her theory of "no-man" rule under bureaucracy, and Hanna Pitkin's analysis of how institutions and modes of thought contribute to the social. Then, moving on to Chapter 2, these ideas will be significant references in my analysis of appearance on the Internet.

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Equality and Conformity under the social

Arendt argues that the transformation of society under the rise of the social alters our understanding of equality so that what we conceptualize as equality is actually conformity. Engaging with this part of Arendt's argument is challenging because in order to get to her conclusion that modern society demands conformity (a point I agree with), one has to untangle Arendt's various imperfect and heavily romanticized definitions of "equality." And once we arrive at the conclusion, Arendt's description of conformity works in subtle, abstract ways. However, it will be important to establish the nuances of conformity under the social in order to show that the conformity that modern society demands mirrors the standardization that social media platforms demand from users. This dynamic goes beyond mirroring when conformity and

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[38] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 29.

abstraction on the Internet negatively impacts the possibility for politics and how we appear in the public realm.

As stated previously, Arendt interprets premodern equality to mean that the inequality of the private realm makes the condition of political equality possible in the public realm. And as I said before, I don't believe that this is the kind of equality we want to return to. All members of society should have the freedom to enter the public realm and participate. The rise of the social, at first glance, appears to serve that ideal by subsuming the unequal public/private distinction and absorbing all of society's members under one umbrella. But for Arendt, equality under the social does not mean that everyone has equal access to the public realm or the same political capacity as a citizen. Rather, equality under the social simply means that all of society is controlled equally by the same system. Arendt writes, "With the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength."[39] Because the social is a distorted version of the public, the equality of the social is not an expanded version of premodern equality in the public realm. Though society "embraces" its members equally in that everyone is constantly living in the social, it does not grant equal freedom or rights to political participation. Equality under the social is therefore a shallow, conceptual form of equality rather than actual political equality.

Arendt and I both reject this shallow concept of equality under the social, but Arendt does so because she believes that social equality eliminates the possibility of gaining recognition and distinction in the public realm. Arendt believes that in the premodern age, a citizen could distinguish themselves through speech and action when engaging in politics in the public realm. This was how human excellence was displayed. In the modern age, however, Arendt writes;

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[39] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 41.

>Society equalizes under all circumstances, and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual.[40]

So for Arendt, the social pushes distinction into the shadows of the private realm. This reversal contradicts Arendt's understanding of the human condition because under the condition of plurality, human excellence and distinction must be recognized by others in order to be actualized. By being seen and heard by others, human excellence is confirmed. Thus, for distinction to be a matter for the individual alone goes directly against Arendt's theory of the human condition. This is how Arendt concludes that modern society negates the possibility of human excellence being validated by plurality for the sake of "social equality." Without distinction, the public realm only contains conformity.

All of that being said, I disagree with Arendt's claim that modern society completely negates the possibility for distinction and recognition of human excellence. The problem is not that no one is distinguished in the public realm, but that not everyone can compete for that distinction as equals. According to Aristotle's concept of "the good life," one cannot enter the public realm without having first mastered necessity. This makes sense because political discourse cannot be conducted fairly if some people are fighting for basic human needs (food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, etc.) while other people are not bound by scarcity. Living under the social by no means guarantees that all basic human needs are met. So while society exerts uniform control by absorbing everything into one system and blurring distinctions, people do not have to experience the effects that control equally depending on the demands of their personal needs. The question of modern equality is not how to bring distinction back into the

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[40] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 41.

public realm, as Arendt suggests, but how to recover premodern equality by guaranteeing

freedom from necessity without sacrificing the humanity of marginalized classes of people.

Modern society is marked by conformism because although it is possible to distinguish

oneself (given the freedom to enter the public realm), the overarching umbrella of the social

dictates the scale and nature of that distinction. Arendt echoes this sentiment when she argues

that the social equality promised by modern society is only possible at the cost of sacrificing

spontaneous action.[41] Under the social, action is possible only if society allows that action to be

realized. Incompatible action can quickly be suppressed by the social in the ways it operates

through large scale markets and bureaucracies (which I will further detail later). In this way,

spontaneity is not compatible with the social. As said before, Arendt believes that action was

excluded from the household in the premodern age. Therefore, because the rise of the social

transforms "society" into one domestic household unit, action disrupts the equalization of

society. Instead, "society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing

innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them

behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement."[42] This results in a flattening

of society, compared to the dynamic agonistic space of the Greek *polis*.

By absorbing all social groups and households under one bureaucratic umbrella, modern

society becomes one of laborers united by the need to maintain life's necessities. When the

household becomes public, there is only room to focus on sustaining life and no space to engage

in political matters or spontaneous action. Arendt sees that in modern society, individuals and

their behavior become increasingly mechanized under the modern nation state's administrative

rule, or the "head of household." Arendt then sees modernity as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy

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[41] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 41.
[42] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 40.

in which behaviorism fuels mass society and mass society reinforces behaviorism in turn. "The unfortunate truth about behaviorism and the validity of its "laws" is that the more people there are, the more likely they are to behave and the less likely to tolerate non-behavior."[43] These "laws" of behaviorism point to the objectification of the individual in mass society. The successful application of these laws results in a flattened, one-dimensional society in which it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish oneself beyond the mean.

Conformity under the social may still be a vague concept. This is due to the fact that I selectively agree with different parts of Arendt's theory, but also the fact that this work observes conformity from a general, abstract perspective. Conformity under the social does not dictate that everyone is the same on an individual level. Rather, the social acts like a filter that informs perception. In the next section, I hope to detail exactly how this happens and explore how the umbrella of the social acts as a controlling and atomizing force.

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"No Man Rule" under the social

Much of the expansion and flattening of society is the result of an increasingly complex economy meeting the burden of biological necessity. The ways in which bureaucracy and administration attempts to adapt under the social results in what Arendt calls "no man rule." In *The Attack of the Blob,* Hanna Pitkin's reading of the social tracks this development, and shows how the connection between economic and biological forces contributes to the development of modern society. Pitkin writes, "Replacing the paterfamilias by the state to contain the dangerous biological forces apparently is no solution, and the social encompasses not only an unregulated market economy but also a centrally regulated and administered one."[44] Pitkin argues that the

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[43] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 43.
[44] Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 12.

conflict between economic and biological forces–the administrative centralized economy and the housekeeping activities of the domestic space–create Arendt's theory of the social.

Pitkin reasons that the conflict between administration and housekeeping is a problem for Arendt because modern governments cannot control the national household in the same way that the ancient paterfamilias controlled the domestic household.[45] The two models of authority are not analogous, which is where conflict arises. For Arendt, under the ancient paterfamilias the common interest of the family unit was decided and sustained by the head of household. In light of the development and expansion of modern society, Arendt writes, "when the peak of the social order is no longer formed by the royal household of an absolute ruler," that the one-man rule of the ancient domestic space becomes a kind of "no-man rule."[46] The dominance and control of the patriarch is assumed by modern governments and markets. And although modern government aims for the "one-man" rule that was possible under the ancient paterfamilias, it fails. The established "no-man" rule of bureaucracy is an unsatisfactory last resort. Like monarchical rule, "no-man" rule decides and maintains the interests of society as a whole, and justifies authority by citing "public opinion" or "public interest." Arendt notes that this is the case for economics as well as social and cultural affairs (i.e. the opinion of "polite society"). But unlike monarchical rule, there is no single authority in democratic governments. The bureaucracy of modern government attempts to realize authority by abstracting the authority of the people making the bureaucracy function. The ultimate sources of that authority cannot be traced, because people within the bureaucracy have sacrificed their individual agency to the agency of the larger system.

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[45] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 12.
[46] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 40.

But even though "nobody" is at the head of mass bureaucracy, Arendt is clear that this does not amount to "no-rule" at all. Rather, she warns that this bureaucracy, the most "social" form of government, may be even more tyrannical than an absolute monarchical system;

> This nobody [...] does not cease to rule for having lost its personality. As we know from the most social form of government, that is, from bureaucracy (the last stage of government in the nation-state just as one-man rule in benevolent despotism and absolutism was its first), the rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule: it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions.[47]

The tyranny of bureaucracy comes from its lack of personality. What is frightening about bureaucracy's authority under the rise of the social is the fact that this "nobody" continues to rule absolutely despite having been abstracted from human influence. In the case of absolute one-man rule, at least the single opinion of the family was decided by an actual person. Under bureaucracy, in contrast, public opinion is ruled by the combination of abstracted individual agency, which results in "nobody."

For Arendt, "nobody" in control is not surprising. This fate aligns with her understanding of the social. Arendt writes that, "A complete victory of society will always produce some sort of "communistic fiction," whose outstanding political characteristic is that it is indeed ruled by an "invisible hand," namely, by nobody."[48] Under bureaucracy, government becomes mere administration because it is too focused on the technical. Administrators focus on the micro puzzles in order to find the most efficient means without questioning their ultimate ends. Pitkin calls these ends, such as "growth" and "development," "simultaneously both uncontroversial and unavoidable."[49] With bureaucracy running the economy, "nobody" is concerned with the larger questions that *should* guide the expert administrators dealing with technical problems. However,

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[47] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40.
[48] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 44.
[49] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 12.

Pitkin writes, "an overall direction nevertheless emerges, as if a resultant of some autonomous force, so that bureaucratic government resembles the market."[50] The dominant will of the ancient paterfamilias is surrendered to "nobody"; that is, bureaucracy and the market.

This concept of "no-man" rule and the way markets and bureaucracies assume authority is important because it helps articulate some of the sources of conformity under the social. Pitkin's description of how "an overall direction" emerges is particularly illustrative, because her observation shows how individual action will always be informed by the dominant will of the market or government under the social. And Arendt's argument that "nobody" is actually directing these systems points to how it seems we are helpless to the general drift of the social. Despite our individual agency, or particular moments of distinction, there is an overall pattern to the social that can easily be taken for granted and difficult to break out of. The concept of "no-man" rule will become important in discussing power and control on the Internet. Chapter 2 will address how social media resembles a market; how bureaucratic structures influence design, ethics and authority on the Internet; and how these power dynamics ultimately impact the individual user's ability to exercise agency.

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Markets and Bureaucracy under the social

It may appear that society is helpless to Arendt's theory of the social. But Pitkin takes issue with this reading, and argues that identifying how different systems and concepts of individual agency contribute to the social illuminates potential ways "out." In *The Attack of the Blob,* Pitkin presents what she calls a genealogy of the social in an attempt to tease out some of its conflicts and ambiguities. Pitkin's main conflict is that the characterization of the social as an

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[50] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 13.

agent separate from and immune to human influence appears to directly oppose the empowering and liberatory principles of Arendt's work. Pitkin writes;

> Arendt writes about the social as if an evil monster from outer space, entirely external and separate from us, had fallen upon us intent on debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes.[51]

Pitkin astutely observes that although Arendt warns against attributing the consequences of human action to "some abstract, personified agency beyond human influence," Arendt engages in that same abstraction with her conception of the social. In the preface of *The Human Condition,* Arendt prompts us "to think what we are doing."[52] Pitkin responds: "But we are doing less and less; our troubles are the work of the social, which is doing this to us."[53] This inconsistency reflects a greater paradox of modernity: the idea that while humans have more power (industrialization, globalization, technological developments, etc.), the problems that result from that growing power appear out of our control. Pitkin writes; "That is the paradox of modernity that has struck so many nineteenth- and particularly twentieth-century thinkers: more and more, as our power grows, the results of our own activities confront us like an alien and hostile force, beyond our influence."[54] That is precisely what problematizes the social. Arendt's concept of the social is presented as autonomous and impervious to human action. Pitkin uses "The Blob" as a metaphor for the social as this alien monster that indiscriminately absorbs and consumes human individuality. However, Pitkin argues in favor of an alternative reading of the social, one that avoids what she calls "apocalyptic mystification."[55] Pitkin aims for a reading in which "The Blob" does not have to be given complete agency.

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[51] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 4.
[52] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.
[53] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 4.
[54] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 8.
[55] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 8.

The Attack of the Blob is Pitkin's attempt to think through Arendt's concept of "the social" without resorting to a mythological Blob. She presents a number of different paths one could take through the "thicket" of the social. While none of these paths resolve the concept's ambiguities, Pitkin's roadmap through the social can be used to access some of the nuances, and I believe they can be useful in mapping Arendt's understanding of the social and its consequences onto the social media age. I will be drawing on Pitkin's analysis of institutions (a continuation of the previous discussion on "no-man" rule) and how modes of thought (and thoughtlessness) continue the social. Later, I will use Pitkin's understanding of institutions to argue that social media can be regarded as an institution of virtual reality in contemporary society, which has led to the proliferation and continuation of modes of thoughtlessness.

Pitkin's institutional approach views the social through organizational structures and patterns of interpersonal conduct, primarily via markets and bureaucracies. Pitkin notes that institutions isolate individuals by instilling patterns of conduct, or what Arendt would call "behavior." These patterns are distributed and enforced through markets and bureaucracies, which forces these institutions into the center of life for the individual under society. Pitkin highlights the ways in which institutions feed the modern paradox regarding agency, in which we leave the outcomes of life to markets and increasingly lose faith in human ability to influence affairs;

> Despairing of the human ability to arrange our affairs deliberately, we cleave to the market, hoping that it will produce impersonally what we cannot achieve directly. When the market in fact produces trouble instead, we try to remedy the damage through administrative measures, which is to say, through bureaucratic regulation. When bureaucratic regulation fails and chokes us, we return without much hope to laissez-faire. So we practice competitive acquisitiveness on the one side and managerialism on the other.[56]

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[56] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 254.

Faith in an institution's ability to fix human problems shifts from the markets to administrative structures in a seemingly endless cycle, as either one is viewed as a solution for the other's errors. This perverse faith that abstract systems will fix problems ultimately reduces what we believe human agency is capable of. I believe, as does Jaron Lanier's work in *You Are Not A Gadget*, that contemporary society places a similar faith in technology and the Internet to solve its own problems. Or at the very least, social media users and the people in charge of social media platforms are caught in a paradox in which users demand solutions from platform creators, while creators claim that the platform has grown to a scale beyond their control. In either case, whether on social media platforms or in a market economy, humans place more faith in abstract systems and in turn reduce ourselves in order to make the systems look good. This cycle inverts the perception of agency, and results in an illusion that if humans are giving the system power via participation and submission, we remain in control. However, the power given to markets and administrative structures is obviously neither voluntary nor conditional. It is an all or nothing system.

Pitkin's institutional perspective also accurately sheds light on how markets and bureaucracies isolate individuals, not only through being trusted with life's outcomes, but also by connecting individuals through abstract, unintentional networks. Pitkin writes;

> Both [markets and bureaucracies] isolate people from each other in the sense of requiring each to mind his own business, leaving overall outcomes to someone else, while at the same time both connect people in ways they do not perceive and cannot intentionally direct.[57]

The ways in which institutions connect individuals is further isolating. But this is exactly what Arendt is getting at when she problematizes how individuals from various social groups or "family structures" are indiscriminately absorbed into the "superfamily" societal structure. While

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[57] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 255.

we are arguably more connected than ever–speaking only in economic and administrative terms, not yet considering the influence of connections through social media networks–these connections are abstract and feel beyond the individual's control and influence.

This connection via abstraction is the result of how power operates in modern institutions. Pitkin asserts that when it comes to institutional power, inequalities of privilege are not synonymous with inequalities of power. That is, "People can be helpless beneficiaries as well as helpless victims."[58] Here Pitkin is arguing that the distribution of privilege does not reflect whether an individual has the power to impact society. This relates to Pitkin's second point: that the problem with power in centralized institutions is "not immobility but inertia", or "the inability to redirect [power] or to influence its direction intentionally."[59] This is to say that institutions are not stagnant. But the constant motion of economic markets appears beyond the individual's ability to act. So while we are able to act under society, the decisions we make can only align with the general drift of the market.

According to Arendt's understanding of appearance, we appear and recognize one another in the world to confirm our reality. In appearing in the world, one confronts common worldliness; and out of common worldliness comes narrative unity, a shared reality. But under modern society, individuals appearing in the world are confronted by institutions and abstract markets rather than a human artifice held in common. Confronting an abstract system is disorienting for the individual. In appearing in modern society, one meets a system that they can only participate in and react to. Furthermore, the individual confronts these institutions with the understanding that the operation of markets and bureaucracies does not rely on human action. As

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[58] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 255.
[59] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 255.

Pitkin illustrates, the concepts of power and action under the rise of the social are clouded by abstraction and helplessness.

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Modes of thought under the social

   Pitkin's ideational approach to the social investigates how our thoughts, ideas, and conceptual frameworks may promote the social. For Pitkin, the question is "what modes of thinking are conducive to the social, and what modes might facilitate freedom."[60] One of her main conclusions is that Arendt's concept of "thoughtlessness"–not the literal absence of thought, but a misguided mode of thinking–contributes to a perpetuated cycle of passivity and delusion that the social both implements and derives power from. In the prologue of *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies "thoughtlessness" as "among the outstanding characteristics of our time."[61] (Hence her prompt to "think what we are doing"). Arendt later presents a brief definition of thoughtlessness: "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty."[62] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* Arendt writes that thoughtlessness includes 1) an inability to think from another's perspective; 2) an inability to think critically for oneself; and 3) a "remoteness from reality."[63] Arendt pairs each aspect of thoughtlessness with a way to correct it. Empathy, the ability to think from another person's standpoint, is the antidote for the first. Arendt prescribes autonomous thought or "self-thinking" for the second. And finally, realism, "Arendt's most central and persistent remedy for all the forms of thoughtlessness," can combat ideological illusion.[64]

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[60] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 269.
[61] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 5.
[62] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 5
[63] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 270.
[64] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 271-212.

It is worth restating that by contrast, thinking (in Arendtian terms) accomplishes what thoughtlessness fails to. Thinking is beneficial because it allows us to check in with ourselves without being informed by the world of appearances, which relates a sense of clarity and separation between the self and the rest of the world. And because, per Arendt, thinking requires being alone with yourself, it has to happen in the private realm. Arendt argues that because the social blurs the distinction between public and private, we lose the space to actually engage in thought. Thus, thoughtlessness becomes the norm under the social. Thoughtlessness is what happens when we are constantly in the social, neither entirely in the public or the private. The social realm and lacking access to true privacy keeps us from reflecting and challenging the status quo.

Arendt argues that totalitarian forces use thoughtlessness and ideological illusion to exert control because thoughtlessness sows doubt in an individual's sense of reality. Totalitarian systems aim to isolate individuals in order to discourage collective action from generating political potential, but create conditions for thoughtlessness to keep isolation from leading to reflective thought. As she was writing, Arendt saw these conditions playing out in America. She viewed Americans as living in a "defactualized world" in which policy is replaced by "image-making."[65] "Image-making" and spectacle will be important when considering how communication on the Internet and social media contribute to thoughtlessness.

Taking Arendt's impressions, Pitkins posits that conditions of thoughtlessness "have only gotten worse," especially when considering what Pitkin calls the kinds of "virtual reality" offered by computers, television, video games, and "visiting sites" on the Internet, "activities that children now begin before they can even walk or talk."[66] This virtual reality "displaces the very

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[65] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 272.
[66] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 272-273.

possibility of reality," and Pitkin argues that this allows for institutions, values, and of course

thoughts to be "shaped in directions that serve the social."[67] For Pitkin, this lack of reality creates

the "hopeless confusion" Arendt writes about. Pitkin writes;

> Much of what Arendt called hopeless confusion, it seems to me, has to do with living our lives as if in a virtual rather than the real world, continually refusing our own perceptions and judgments to the contrary. Since this way of thinking greatly interferes with effective action, conditions in the real world get worse, and the gap between thought and reality widens, necessitating ever more illusion.[68]

Living as if in a virtual world, we refuse our sense perceptions and judgements that reflect the

real world. This is because we are relying on our own senses rather than seeing other people

confirm our senses. Doubting reality in a virtual world leads to more illusion, and further

establishes thoughtlessness as a dominant mode of (un)thinking. Reading Pitkin's analysis in

2021, it appears obvious that the virtual reality Pitkin fears has only been heightened. Pitkin was

concerned about "living our lives *as if* in a virtual world." I argue that contemporary society has

gotten closer to migrating into that virtual world, especially in light of a global pandemic. What

happens when we find ourselves increasingly immersed in that virtual world?

The virtual reality of contemporary society is supported by institutions of virtual reality,

which Pitkin begins to consider. Pitkin briefly addresses social media in her attempt to "rethink"

the social through an institutional lens. She asks whether the Internet "and the ghostly

"relationships" of virtual reality" should be regarded as an emerging institution in the same way

as the markets and bureaucracies she considers in relation to the social.

> The potential of the Internet as an empowering and liberating tool seems to me far outweighed by its technobiological, depersonalizing, distracting, and isolating aspects. People already politicized and actively, autonomously engaged in public life could take advantage of its facilities, but it is unlikely to invite or incite people into action, let alone into public responsibility as either markets or bureaucracies.[69]

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[67] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 273.
[68] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 273.
[69] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 255.

Pitkin, writing in 1998, saw the conditions Arendt describes as having gotten worse. In the following chapters, I will be drawing from Pitkin's institutional and ideational analyses to examine how the institutions and modes of thought prevalent in the age of social media compare to the patterns observed by Arendt and Pitkin.

Chapter 2

Having laid out Arendt's understanding of appearance and the social, I hope to use these references in order to how social media extends the abstraction, isolation, and delusion of the social. The social constitutes a new realm of human activity by subsuming both the public and the private. Elements of both the public and private realms are distorted when combined and levelled under the umbrella of "society." I believe social media can be regarded as an extension of the social, another pseudo public realm, because social media platforms also blur the distinction between public and private. However, I argue that social media goes one step further by extending abstraction to subsuming the personal, as well. While economic markets under the social abstract one's labor power and capital, and administrative bureaucracy abstracts one's capacity as a citizen, social media platforms abstract the self. And while simply logging off appears to be an easy solution to this problem, social media has influenced modes of thought in a way that discourages that kind of spontaneous exit. I believe a healthy public realm allows one to disclose their identity, confirm one's understanding of how one relates to the rest of the world, and finally, associate and engage with others in order to generate political power. Social media presents a distorted version of each of these activities, and ultimately fails to support the web of human relationships and the capacity for natality.

In *You Are Not A Gadget,* Jaron Lanier expresses a common belief among technologists: the web started out as a shining example of how human potential could be used for positive ends, but something went wrong. He writes;

> Who would have guessed (at least at first) that millions of people would put so much effort into a project without the presence of advertising, commercial motive, threat of punishment, charismatic figures, identity politics, exploitation of the fear of death, or any of the other classic motivators of mankind. In vast numbers, people did something

cooperatively, solely because it was a good idea, and it was beautiful.[70]

The collaborative human effort that went into creating the early web is inspiring because, as Lanier says, the ends of the project were not motivated by vices that have classically foiled other human endeavors. In some ways the early Internet is Arendtian in the way a plurality of collaborators created something greater than itself, with the intention of establishing an artifice that would last longer than its creators. But this initial optimism in human effort was eventually corrupted by a perverse faith in the power of computers that, in turn, reduced humanity's faith in itself. Lanier writes, "The central faith of the web's early design has been superseded by a different faith in the centrality of imaginary entities epitomized by the idea that the internet as a whole is coming alive and turning into a superhuman creature."[71] This reading of the web as a "superhuman creature" that has become larger than all of us follows the same trajectory as Arendt's theory of the social. The perversion Lanier notes is often marked by technologists as the introduction of web 2.0, the design that made the Internet into a more dynamic space that led to social media's mass proliferation. This leads me to believe that social media is social in the negative Arendtian sense.

We engage with many basic phenomena of appearance when we interact with social media platforms. Per Arendt, we feel an urge to appear and be recognized by others, and that urge is fulfilled by the space of appearance. Social media also acts as a space of self-presentation. There is an urge to post on social media because it is how we make ourselves known in the digital space, by appearing and being observed by other people observing on the Internet. Like in the space of appearance, we act as both subjects of spectatorship and spectators ourselves on social media. For Arendt, spectators observe appearances in the world, and

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[70] Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget.* (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010) 14.

[71] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 14.

therefore confirm one's existence. When we see that other people have also seen us, we can confirm that we are real. Interacting with social media is also a form of spectatorship because through scrolling, one observes the presentation and expression of other online personas. Images of other people are fed into a constant stream of information.

Social media has expanded the possibilities of appearance and spectatorship. For Arendt, the space of appearance provides the greatest possibility to "be seen and heard by everybody."[72] Social media realizes that possibility in some ways. In early 2000, about half of adults in America were online. As of 2021, 93% of adults use the Internet.[73] On a global scale, Cisco projects that there will be 5.3 billion total Internet users in 2023.[74] At first glance, based on the sheer number of people connected to the Internet, it seems that there could be a virtual space of appearance that actually provides the greatest possibility of being seen and heard by the plurality of humanity. The virtual space of appearance carries a potential to expand the public realm and promises to make appearance and recognition more accessible. Maybe there is a world where this can be accomplished, and the virtual realm establishes a space that connects plurality in a way that generates power and supports common worldliness on a virtual, global scale. However, the potential of the Internet as a tool has not lived up to this promise.

While the same principles of appearance may be served by social media's design as a space of presentation and expression, appearance and spectatorship are distorted on social media platforms. Self-presentation and appearance on social media, the actual "act" of appearing, is quite different in the virtual space compared to stepping out into the public realm. This is almost

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[72] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 50.
[73] "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/.
[74] "Cisco Annual Internet Report (2018–2023) White Paper," Cisco.com, Cisco, revised on March 9, 2020 https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collateral/executive-perspectives/annual-internet-report/white-paper-c11-741490.html.

entirely due to how temporality operates on the Internet. The Internet exists in a sort of infinite present. As you scroll through your social media feed, you are fed fragments of content, image, and information that are apparently connected to time (via timestamps), but your perception and comprehension of the content is barely connected to its particular temporal context. A social media feed is totalitarian when it comes to context. The purpose of the feed is to filter and centralize fragments of content into one stream of information. At that point, the particular temporal and geographic context of each fragment is subsumed by the feed. The feed is the only context, the common denominator. The centralized feed of a social media platform is similar to the Arendtian social in that everything is brought into one space without distinction. The Internet's malleable temporality and singular context creates a new realm for online content and expression.

The lack of temporal restrictions on the Internet distorts self-presentation online because it allows you to alter your appearance. Stepping out into the public realm is an immediate phenomena; but online, appearance does not have to be immediate. We *choose* whether to appear on the Internet, and we have more control over how we do it. For Arendt, no one can tell their own story. This is due to the uncertainty of human action: we can control what we do, but we cannot control the perceptions and consequences of our actions. We have to rely on other people to witness our lives, and then tell stories about our lives, because those are the narratives that encapsulate how our actions translated first into reality, and then history. Social media platforms give us control over the personal archives we use them to create. Presence on social media is meant to be a crystallization of your physical self, a purposefully curated reflection of your physical existence. In mediating the representation of a physical self into a digital presence, social media platforms give us the space and the tools to tell our own stories.

While the tools of social media seem to expand our capacity to appear, that expansion carries its own limitations. The stories that we are able to tell about ourselves are determined by the platforms we use. In order to use these tools, we have to reduce our personal existence into rigid structures in order to fit the platform's design. This is what leads Lanier to say that social media platforms encourage "standardized presences" online. Lanier describes the rise of social networking sites as, "An endless series of gambits backed by gigantic investments [that] encouraged young people entering the online world for the first time to create standardized presences on sites like Facebook."[75] One has to create an online presence in order to gain access to the online world. But the possibilities of that online presence (and the online world in general, for that matter) are ultimately dictated by the technical standards of the platform. And according to Lanier, the technology demands the reduction of personhood online.

> Something like missionary reductionism has happened to the internet with the rise of web 2.0. [...] Individual web pages as they first appeared in the early 1990s had the flavor of personhood. MySpace preserved some of that flavor, though a process of regularized formatting had begun. Facebook went further, organizing people into multiple-choice identities.[76]

The way social media platforms, starting with Facebook, reconstructed online identity into multiple-choice answers and rigid categories shows how the technology of the Internet fails to capture the valuable plurality of identity contained in Arendt's public realm. Facebook's design is replete with examples of that failure. In the public realm we are constantly defining and re-defining ourselves in relation to other people. On Facebook, however, everyone in your virtual social network is a "friend." If we understand the condition of natality to be as crucial to the human condition as Arendt does (that is, if we want to embrace the fact that every person is distinctly themselves), Facebook's flattening of relationship to "friend" stands in direct

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[75] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 16.
[76] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 48.

opposition to what is essentially human.

On social media platforms that reduce human connection to Facebook "friends" or Instagram "followers," the technology's incapacity to account for natality's inherently infinite possibilities overrides the distinctness of individual identity for the sake of convenience and expedition. And we voluntarily accede that exchange by using the platforms. Some of the limitations of computer technology can be attributed to the nature of binary code; the technology of social media platforms is ultimately constructed on the concept of *on* or *off*, 1 or 0. But while some of these limitations can be seen as inherent in the technology, Lanier argues that when online identity is constructed and presented via technology's binary foundation, personhood is reduced to multiple choice, either/or categories. He also argues that we implicitly accept technology's reduction of personhood when we consent for our identity to be standardized online. In order to interact with a computer as if it were a person (asking search engines questions, perusing products "recommended" to you, voicing commands to disembodied virtual assistants, or even making "eye contact" with someone on a video chat by looking into the camera) you have to accept that part of you could be conceived as a program, as well.[77] When you listen to a song made on a computer, you are probably comfortable with the idea that the music is a product of technology; but when you see your own appearance and identity filtered through a computer program, you start viewing yourself as what all of those little bits of information are supposed to represent. Social media platforms give us control over our appearance online, but that agency exists within the confines of technology. In my view, any control we have over online appearances comes at the price of offering up our personal identity to be abstracted into a computational system, and then reconstructing that identity into a digital self based on fragmented, standardized bits of content. The superhuman ability to influence how

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[77] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 4.

others perceive us online comes at the price of viewing ourselves and others in reductive ways.

Even though you have the power to create your own story using social media, you still rely on other people to view and process that narrative. We need other people to regard our digital presences in order for them to matter and to be recognized by plurality. But spectatorship is also affected by the Internet's infinite present. On social media, shared content has been isolated from any of the context that made it meaningful to the person who posted it. Lanier writes, "When you come upon a video clip or picture or stretch of writing that has been made available in the web 2.0 manner, you almost never have access to the history or the locality in which it was perceived to have meaning by the anonymous person who left it there."[78] The spectator's understanding of who someone is based on an online profile comes from digital crystallizations of personality reduced to alienated information. And when our impression of someone is created in a decontextualized space, we start to reduce our own conception of personhood to fragmented identifying traits.

The feedback we receive from people observing us has also been fragmented on the Internet. By feedback, I mean how we understand ourselves based on how our actions have been translated into history through storytelling. In the physical space of appearance, we recognize each other in real time. I observe other people observing me in the public realm, and the way I see myself is influenced by my perception of how other people are looking at me. Other people observe our actions, and when they tell stories about us they create the meaning of our actions within the common narrative of history. The immediate feedback of appearance and spectatorship informs our understanding of ourselves in relation to a dynamic world. Social media promises to recreate this process of recognition in expanding the possibilities of the web of human relationships. Instead have flattened the way we discern whether someone has seen our

[78] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget.*

digital presence into quantitative assessments. This limits our ability to interpret how other people have seen us. We garner "likes," "retweets," and "views," but these symbols do not (and cannot) communicate what they purport to communicate (or, for that matter, what we want them to communicate).

Facebook introduced the "like" button as a way to "send little bits of positivity" across the network with a single click.[79] Since its introduction, the "like" button has been adopted by Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and countless other websites. "Likes" were the beginning of a system of symbols and analytics representing interaction online. In a 2009 blog post introducing the "like" button, Leah Pearlman, then a product manager at Facebook wrote, "We've just introduced an easy way to tell friends that you like what they're sharing on Facebook with one easy click. Wherever you can add a comment on your friends' content, you'll also have the option to click "Like" to tell your friends exactly that: "I like this."[80] Pearlman says it herself. The "like" button expresses one sentiment: "I like this." At face value, saying "I like this" is not saying much at all. And on social media, this is almost a good thing because the "like" button was designed to be used in response to all sorts of content on Facebook. Pearlman opens that 2009 blog post with the following overview of her Facebook feed; "There's a lot of content my friends have shared on Facebook that's pretty awesome. For instance, in the last few days I've seen photos from a friend's wedding, an article about U.S. President Obama's ongoing transition and status updates from a friend traveling in India."[81] She then introduces the "like," implying that the "like" button could be relevant to any range of "pretty awesome" content. The "like" does not carry meaning

[79] Paul Lewis, "'Our minds can be hijacked': the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia," TheGuardian.com, Guardian News & Media Limited, October 6, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia.

[80] Leah Pearlman, "I like this," Facebook.com, Facebook, February 9, 2009, https://www.facebook.com/notes/10160195053101729/.

[81] Pearlman, "I like this."

itself, but it is a symbol that we can project meaning onto. "Likes" can be interpreted as a signal of practically anything, from ardent support and sympathy to neutral acknowledgement.

"Likes" can be considered a part of the Internet's symbolic language. These symbols, stemming from "likes", are based on the same binary code as the platforms themselves, which reduces every reaction or attempt at symbolic communication to an either/or choice. You either "like" something, or you don't. Before Facebook expanded the possibilities of "liking" something in 2015 (now you can react to posts using "love," "haha," "yay," "wow," "sad," and "angry" buttons), and besides comments, engagement on Facebook could only be evaluated in terms of "likes." The endless complexities of human emotion were compressed into one symbol. This is still the case on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The platform dictates what can be expressed, and in limiting communication to either "like" or no like, the platform creates a value system lacking the capacity to consider quality. This limits how spectators can recognize someone's appearance. "Likes," "views," and comments are not simply efficient representations of real human interaction, as promised, but rather objects to collect, the ultimate goal being to accumulate as many as you can. All content is interpreted based on quantitative analytics, and this single plane of evaluation flattens communication. We eventually come to evaluate ourselves and other people quantitatively. The way social media platforms dictate communication into narrow, quantitatively-based channels is an extension of how the Arendtian social blurs distinctions between human activity. Anyone who uses a social media platform must conform to the platform's system of communication, just like members of society must conform to the expanded economic and bureaucratic systems of the social.

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Is social media a public realm or an extension of the social?

Having laid out how aspects of appearance and spectatorship operate on social media, what does this mean for social media as a virtual space of appearance? Do the distortions of temporality, recognition, and communication impact social media's potential as a public realm? Arendt says that one of the functions of the space of appearance is to support the web of human relationships because it is where we appear before one another, recognize each other, and create stories about the world. Arendt also says that the space of appearance provides the greatest possibility to "be seen and heard by everybody." In my view, the Internet realizes that possibility in some way. Social media is a way of sustaining the web of human relationships beyond the confines of space and time. Expanding the possibilities of the web of human relationships could be a good thing that results in a more accessible, more diverse public realm. And social media does act like a public realm in that it makes us aware that other people exist and we can use it to make other people aware that we exist.

But social media is not as egalitarian as it was hoped to be. Instead of expanding the public realm, social media has become a more fragmented and isolating space. Social media ultimately does away with common worldliness and plurality. Every person is viewing a personalized feed of information on social media. This is arguably, according to advertising, part of social media's appeal: your feed is personalized to you. But this also means that the "reality" confirmed by social media (witnessing other people's online activity, which is understood to be an extension of their physically real existence) is specifically fed only to you. In a traditional understanding of appearance, we are out in the world sensing the things around us. Each person carries their own perceptions of the world, but everyone is in the same physical and temporal landscape. On social media, rather than perceiving the common world and selectively retaining

sensory information, algorithms select content–based on metrics such as "likes"–for you to observe. Virtuality denies the common worldliness of things as a guaranteed condition of human existence.

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Social media as a public realm

As discussed in Chapter 1, Arendt and Benhabib conceptualize the "agonistic" model of public space as a space of display, competition, recognition, and distinction. The "agonistic" space is where we disclose our identity to the world through speech and action in hopes of being recognized. Social media platforms are also spaces of self-disclosure and display. We present ourselves on social media–our accomplishments, our ideas, our opinions–in hopes of distinguishing ourselves from the rest. And by expanding the potential reach of the virtual space of appearance, social media extends the ways through which we can disclose our identity to the world and compete among one another for recognition. Arendt and Benhabib also link agonistic space with confronting mortality, because we distinguish ourselves in hopes of creating a personal narrative that continues to exist after we die. Social media platforms also give us a chance to seek security in death. The possibility of going viral online encapsulates this aim. We share in hopes of making an impression and becoming a part of the shared human narrative. In this way, social media serves the desire to create something that will be remembered.

Additionally, Arendt and Benhabib say that when people gather together, they create "associational" public space. Facebook seems to be the social media platform that is most interested in recreating this aspect of the public realm. Facebook groups and pages can become associational spaces, whether as hubs dedicated to political organizing for a specific cause or neighborhood pages used to discuss community issues. In his paper rethinking the public sphere

in the social media age, Alexey Salikov considers the fragmentation of online associational

spaces from Arendt's perspective. Salikov says that Arendt might have seen the fragmentation of

the virtual space as a natural consequence under representative systems of government, as her

idea of the public realm consists of small, local places, which cannot be achieved in large nation

states.[82] Because Arendt advocates for localism and ground-level self-organization over

centralized administration, "From Arendt's point of view, the political role of social networks

would reside in creating and disseminating a wide range of individual opinions."[83]

But Arendt's view of public space requires plurality; there cannot be a single, dominant

opinion. And social media's design encourages and profits off of creating many different

fragmented spaces according to similar interests. Lanier writes that "The fancy web 2.0 designs

of the early twenty-first century start off by classifying people into bubbles, so you meet your

own kind. Facebook tops up dating pools, LinkedIn corrals careerists, and so on."[84] This

classification system creates isolated and marginalized groups that are united by common beliefs

or interests, and do not have to communicate with each other. According to Nancy Fraser,

excluding certain social groups from the larger public sphere can lead to the creation of

alternative public realms in which identity and interests are defined in opposition to some

exclusive norm.[85] Salikov writes,

> As a result, these groups can become marginalized from the large-scale public sphere
> themselves, forming echo chambers with very similar views and interests of their users.
> All this can ultimately lead to the even stronger homogenization of views within such
> groups, to the filtering out of news and information coming in from the outside which
> does not fit into the world picture of these groups' members, to declaring something false
> to be true, to the creation of fake news, and to the radicalization of their agenda in order

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[82] Alexey Salikov. "Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Rethinking the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Media," *Russian Sociological Review* 17, no.4 (2018): 95, doi: 10.17323/1728-192x-2018-4-88-102.

[83] Salikov, 96.

[84] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 72.

[85] Salikov, 90.

to make themselves heard in the society. However, this does not allow marginalized groups to better understand or reach a consensus with other societal groups, but only leads to their further marginalization.[86]

Members of these groups can only communicate within the group to receive recognition. This goes against Arendt's understanding of the public realm because it does not foster plurality.

<center>*   *   *</center>

Social media as an extension of the social

Arendt's primary definition of the social conceptualizes a new realm of human activity that absorbs both the public and the private, blurring the distinction between the two. I argue that social media does the same thing. In the virtual social media space, everything is jumbled onto one platform, which is why the personal can quickly become confused with the political online. This is partly due to the fact that social media platforms (specifically Facebook) offer many different combinations of public and private. Salikov writes,

> There is a broad range of communities in social media, from those public spaces near to the classic ideal of the public sphere on the one pole, to the rather private spaces with some public traits on the other pole. This concerns both the subject matter of published information (it can be very personal) and the circle of the targeted audience (it can be limited to a few people).[87]

Though different spaces can exist on a platform like Facebook, everything is centralized.

Instagram and TikTok are platforms that fit Arendt's model of the social even more closely. Facebook pages and groups give the impression of separation and distinction between the political and the personal. But Instagram and TikTok are designed so that there is no distinction between the political and the personal. Political messaging or calls for political organizing are interspersed with memes, selfies, skits, and lifestyle updates. We view all of these pieces of content within the same context.

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[86] Salikov, 90-91.
[87] Salikov, 91.

The centralized social media feed is also a reflection of how digital selves have to be curated to account for both the personal and the political. Because there is no distinction between the personal and the political on social media, everything connected to the digital self could potentially be either or both. For example, sharing an infographic on Instagram with information regarding a political issue is not an act of political speech, but a way of signaling an aspect of your identity. Because the content of your Instagram profile is purportedly an extension of your "real life" personality, a political statement is also a statement about who you are. On social media, political opinion becomes incorporated into the digital self. For Arendt, the political and the personal (or private) should be separate. Expressing a political opinion in the *polis* should not be connected to private matters having to do with your existence as a distinct natality. But on Instagram, we voluntarily place the personal (a picture of your meal or a video of your kids) on the same plane as the political. Alternately, because the political and the personal exist on the same plane without distinction, personal statements can have political intent projected onto them. Because anything "could" be political, spectators on the Internet are justified in scrutinizing a personal expression for potential political statements. The result is conformism and a fear of heterodoxy; a kind of internal, possibly unconscious editing of appearance in response to public opinion. In my view, the desire to avoid being called out for a potential political statement projected onto one's digital presentation is similar to the way Arendt sees the social as an enforcing agent of behaviorism. Under the social, everything is viewed in the same light. And this constant illumination enforces the laws of behaviorism and discourages action both in terms of disclosing one's natality and engaging in politics.

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Markets and bureaucracy on social media

An important concept in understanding markets and bureaucracy under the social is "no man" rule, in which decision makers are essentially technocrats solving a series of technical problems without considering what ends the solutions may be serving. "No man" rule establishes an administration concerned with short-term details rather than long-term effects. Even though no one is addressing the bigger questions in these administrative systems, Pitkin writes, "an overall direction nevertheless emerges, as if a resultant of some autonomous force, so that bureaucratic government resembles the market." This overall direction of the Internet as a market mirrors the overall direction of the market economy: growth and expansion, "development."

The algorithms of social media platforms expand the reach of "no man" rule. Algorithms are automated decision making systems.[88] A reality of the Internet age is that algorithms do "rule" the virtual space in some ways, in that they influence the possibilities for expression and access to content. Algorithms create content based on user data, manage flows of content through recommendations, mediate interaction with information via likes and comments, and filter information in order to create incentives (similar to engineering a market).[89] Algorithms influence what we see and what we interact with online. They influence how we understand ourselves and our preferences by interpreting our browsing habits and recommending us content. Although human labor goes into creating these algorithms, the user does not play an active role in the algorithmic processes of mediation, organization, and recommendation. The algorithm is left to make decisions, with humans only stepping in when the algorithm makes a mess of things. From a user perspective, there is no control over the general drift of a social media feed.

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[88] Robert Hunt et al. "Algorithmic Regulation in Media and Cultural Policy: A Framework to Evaluate Barriers to Accountability," *Journal of Information Policy* 9 (2019): 307-35. doi:10.5325/jinfopoli.9.2019.0307.
[89] Hunt et al, 309-310.

Participation on the Internet, especially when interacting with algorithms, is inherently tied to commerce. This is because the "general drift" of algorithm-based platforms is fueled by business models as opposed to a desire to connect users with what is actually most beneficial to them. The aim of any business venture is to grow, and this incentivizes companies to develop algorithms that will keep users glued to screens and exposed to advertising as much as possible.[90] The commercialization of the Internet resembles how, per Pitkin, the social relies on markets. Lanier supports this idea when he says that while expression on the Internet has been flattened and decontextualized for the most part, advertising is the only form of content that necessarily retains context. "Any other form of expression is to be remashed, anonymized, and decontextualized to the point of meaninglessness. Ads, however, are to be made ever more contextual, and the content of the ad is absolutely sacrosanct."[91] Writing in 2010, Lanier projects that ads will be the only content that "survives" on Internet platforms.

> A functioning, honest crowd-wisdom system ought to trump paid persuasion. If the crowd is so wise, it should be directing each person optimally in choices related to home finance, the whitening of yellow teeth, and the search for a lover. [...] Every penny Google earns suggests a failure of the crowd–and Google is earning a lot of pennies.[92]

Lanier says that a healthy public realm ought to be able to resist the temptations of advertising. However, it is clear that the Internet has failed in this regard. Online culture is suffused with advertising. All content can be tied back to commerce. Internet users readily support this advertising economy with every click. We become ads for ourselves, ads for attention.

Another important concept that can be drawn from Arendt and Pitkin's discussion of markets is that humans place an illogical faith in market systems under the social because the systems have assumed an authority that appears beyond individual human influence. Markets

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[90] Hunt et al, 314.
[91] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 82.
[92] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 83.

and bureaucracies create problems, which we then look to markets and bureaucracies to solve.

Pitkin describes a cycle of markets and administrative interventions;

> "Despairing of the human ability to arrange our affairs deliberately, we cleave to the market, hoping that it will produce impersonally what we cannot achieve directly. When the market in fact produces trouble instead, we try to remedy the damage through administrative measures, which is to say, through bureaucratic regulation. When bureaucratic regulation fails and chokes us, we return without much hope to laissez-faire. So we practice competitive acquisitiveness on the one side and managerialism on the other."[93]

Pitkin's observations support Arendt's argument that under the social, human activity and politics is reduced to administration and managerialism focused on behavior. We let markets and bureaucratic systems run the show while we stand by to solve the technical problems created by the systems.

The faith in administrative and market-based solutions that Pitkin describes is comparable to the faith we have in the Internet. There is a tendency to view computers as superhuman instruments of knowledge. In reality, however, computers are the products of human knowledge. Meredith Broussard, author of *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand The World*, rejects the belief in computational superiority. She says, "often, we talk about computers as being able to do anything, and that's just rhetoric because ultimately they're machines, and what they do is they compute, they calculate, and so anything you can turn into math, a computer can do."[94] While we are drawn to the idea that computers can do anything (especially if that includes saving us from any number of cultural or political woes), the fact is that computers can do anything humans can convert into math. The faith in computational systems mirrors the faith in institutions under the social because although these systems are the

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[93] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob,* 254.

[94] Angela Chen, "How computers misunderstand the world," The Verge, Vox Media, May 23, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/23/17384324/meredith-broussard-artifical-unintelligence-technology-criticism-technochauvinism.

products of human knowledge and labor, they come to be viewed as superhuman and immune to

individual human agency. This view is harmful because in order to adopt it, we have to reduce

our own agency. As Lanier writes, "when people are told that a computer is intelligent, they

become prone to changing themselves in order to make the computer appear to work better,

instead of demanding that the computer be changed to become more useful."[95] We reduce

ourselves in order for our creations to look good, even if that means attributing superhuman

power and influence to technology at the expense of our own agency.

A consequence of this faith in computers is that technology is used to solve social

problems as if they were technical problems, though this effect is often minimized. Under the

social, administrative structures treat everything in terms of technical problems and seek to find

market-based solutions for those problems. Algorithms work similarly. Though algorithms are

seen as operating objectively, solving purely technical problems, algorithms actually make

"cultural policy."[96] That is, by influencing what we see and consume, algorithms influence

culture and how we see the world. Algorithms are based in society and human bias, and therefore

when algorithms are used to solve apparently technical problems, the issue can inevitably be

traced back to a social issue. Authors Robert Hunt and Fenwick McKelvey illustrate the

underlying illogism behind using algorithms to solve social problems;

> The idea that we can "fix bias" by better optimizing algorithmic systems rests on the
> assumption that every social problem has a technical solution and evades urgent
> questions about how technologies [...] are used to perpetuate injustice irrespective of the
> efficacy of their algorithms.[97]

Like bureaucracy resulting from the social, algorithms attempt to manage society by turning

social issues into technical problems. However, as Arendt and Pitkin illustrate, attempting to

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[95] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 36.
[96] Hunt et al, 319.
[97] Hunt et al, 319.

re-engineer isolated instances of systemic problems fails to consider the big picture, and ultimately perpetuates the underlying problems.

Belief in the "noosphere" or "hive mind" is another example of this perverse faith in the Internet's potential. The "noosphere" describes a belief touted by computationalists that the Internet assumes a collective consciousness that emerges from the collaboration of web users. The belief is that the individual consciousnesses of web users are abstracted and combined into create a greater, collective consciousness. But belief in the hive mind goes one step further in thinking of this Internet collective consciousness as an emergent superintelligence. This reflects a general guiding principle of the Internet, that quantity is a better judgement than quality. Lanier disagrees with the idea shared by his colleagues, that "a million, or perhaps a billion, fragmentary insults will eventually yield wisdom that surpasses that of any well-thought-out essay, so long as sophisticated secret statistical algorithms recombine the fragments."[98] I also disagree. Placing faith in the "hive mind" approaches justifying mob rule. The individual is absorbed into the "hive mind," much like the individual is swallowed up by the Arendtian social. And in this process of abstraction, we increasingly lose our bearing on the world and the ability to stand outside the social and act against it.

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[98] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 49.

Conclusion

I will conclude this project with some final reflections on privacy and thoughtlessness on the Internet; the political implications of these conditions; and what it would take to create a model of online public space that stands outside the social.

Reflecting on Arendt's distinction between public and private, I believe social media and the prevalence of our digital selves has seriously distorted contemporary experiences of privacy and thought. We think about the accessibility of appearance and the scope of spectatorship on social media platforms more than one might think. When one engages in the virtual space, there is an implicit understanding that the "public" part of the digital public is dangerous. Publicity on the Internet translates into potential observation of our online presences by anyone at any time, limited only by access to a wifi connection. Other than extreme proponents of "free culture" online, no one wants this. Privacy on the Internet therefore becomes a safeguard from total digital publicity. In "Privacy in the Digital Age," authors Nuala O'Connor, Alethea Lange and Ali Lange write;

> For an individual, digital privacy is about the ability to shape one's own online identity and decide when, how and where to share parts of that identity with people, companies or other selected entities. The freedom to create an identity online is the essence of conceptual privacy; in practice, it lies in the ability to develop and curate a digital portrait that reflects personal preferences.[99]

Cultivating a digital presence and having control over that appearance is crucial to protecting one's digital privacy. But on the other hand, government and corporate entities have control over the platforms with which we cultivate our digital selves.[100] A reality of appearance in the digital space is that appearing as a digital self requires us to allow various parties access to that appearance. However, denying access to some parties (blocking people, changing the sharing

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[99] Nuala O'Connor et al. "Privacy in the Digital Age." *Great Decisions*, 2015, 18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214790.

[100] O'Connor et al, 24.

settings on a post, etc.) requires gaining access to the platform itself (signing privacy policy agreements, "understanding" that the site uses cookies, etc). Hence privacy on a social media platform is nothing like privacy in the real world. Privacy on social media is conditional: you can keep certain parties from viewing your online presence but you can never completely remove your online presence from potential observation without destroying the digital self you have cultivated.

Privacy on the Internet is not really possible, which seriously impacts the ability for thought if you feel as connected to your life online as your "real" life. If your real self is influenced by your online self just as much as your real self influences your online presentation, the virtual space becomes more and more immersive. Arendt says it is not possible to constantly appear in the public sphere; it is necessary to step away from appearing and engage in critical self dialogue, or thinking. This is because you cannot "think" and "act" simultaneously. And when one does not engage in critical thought, the individual is lulled into "thoughtlessness." According to Pitkin's reading of "the social," the social forces us to constantly be in that passive, reactive, consumer mindset. Social media instills the same mindset, and profits off of it.

The constant potential display of social media makes retreating from action even harder. On top of that, enabling notifications maintains a constant stream of potential feedback. This further impedes our ability to step away from the light of the public and reflect. I think this is part of what Sherry Turkle touches on in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other,* when she writes; "I once described the computer as a second self, a mirror of mind. Now the metaphor no longer goes far enough. Our new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology."[101] Without reflection, the virtual self can be easily

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[101] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from*

confused with the "real" self. The virtual reality becomes a more demanding, more expansive, more consuming space.

Arendt defines thoughtlessness as 1) an inability to think from another person's perspective; 2) an inability to think critically for oneself; and 3) a "remoteness from reality." Thoughtlessness instills a reactive mindset. She says that under the social, because there is no distinction between the maintenance of life and the organization of life, we become too focused on consumption in the name of necessity. The social makes us confuse necessity because we come to associate consumption with sustaining life. In the virtual space, I believe the same thing happens. Consuming becomes a necessity because it is how we connect with the world. But in this reactive, consumptive mindset, our worst instincts come out. And when our worst instincts are not checked by reflection, we become further deluded into being ruled by a distorted understanding of "necessity."

On social media in particular, toxic behavior comes from emotions that we are not given the resources (namely, time away from social media) to process. Lanier, for example, relates two infantile traumas to Internet use in a way that shows how some of our deepest needs can be shallowly soothed through social media. For Lanier, those needs are attention and connection. Children obviously want attention. Per Arendt's understanding of appearance outlined in Chapter 1, part of the desire to be seen and given attention comes from a need to confirm that we are real. Lanier writes, "young adults, in their newly extended childhood, can now perceive themselves to be finally getting enough attention, through social networks and blogs."[102] But attention on social media platforms has been flattened and fragmented into meaningless symbols that do not communicate the recognition they promise. On this point, I do not believe that you can ever feel

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Each Other (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 16.

[102] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 180.

as if you have gotten "enough attention" through social media. But the reliance on social media for attention is further sustained by separation anxiety. Lanier writes, "Separation anxiety is assuaged by constant connection. Young people announce every detail of their lives on services like Twitter not to show off, but to avoid the closed door at bedtime, the empty room, the screaming vacuum of an isolated mind."[103] I think Lanier is right about the infantile need for attention driving social media use. And social media keeps us hooked in giving us that brief rush of dopamine, but often fails to serve that need in a sustainable way.

The thoughtlessness that social media instills and profits off of influences how we behave on the Internet. And because social media distorts how we understand ourselves and how we relate to others, specifically by reducing that understanding to abstracted, fragmented bits of information, it is easy to feel sucked into behaviors that we are not proud of. Lanier argues;

> Emphasizing the crowd means deemphasizing individual humans in the design of society, and when you ask people not to be people, they revert to bad moblike behaviors. This leads not only to empowered trolls, but to a generally unfriendly and unconstructive online world.[104]

The standardization and impersonality of technological platforms reduces representations of our digital selves to fragmented bits of information. By creating our digital selves with these platforms and attempting to reflect our "real" selves as much as possible, we internalize this reductive mindset. The way social media emphasizes the crowd encourages the individual to see themselves as merely one, fragmented profile in a sea of other fragments. We not only see ourselves as fragments, but we regard other digital selves in the same way. And it is difficult to feel empathy for bits of information as if they are the people they supposedly represent. Social media platforms atomize the digital self, which gives the impression that actions online have minimal consequences. And this leads to thoughtless, inhuman interactions online.

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[103] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 180.
[104] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 19-20.

I argue that these processes of abstraction and thoughtlessness continued under social media as an extension of the social do more than affect the individual. Abstraction and thoughtlessness influence the ways in which we organize ourselves politically. And social media influences political discourse by creating particular political conditions in which spectacle (or what Arendt calls "image-making") thrives as a form of political communication. Spectacle in politics, as a symptom of the social, impedes the agency both of the individual citizen and the policy maker by reducing political stakes to maintaining image, manipulating perspective, and chasing symbolic rather than substantive change.

In "The Presidential Spectacle," Bruce Miroff defines spectacle as a symbolic event that stands for a broader meaning serving a political message. Spectacles are meaningful not in the action, but in what the gestures signify. And because the intent of a spectacle is to project symbolic messages rather than enact substantive policy, Miroff says spectacles are not meant to be participatory. He writes;

> A spectacle does not permit the audience to interrupt the action and redirect its meaning. Spectators can become absorbed in a spectacle or can find it unconvincing, but they cannot become performers. A spectacle is not designed for mass participation; it is not a democratic event.[105]

Spectacles are passive in that they are political messages that one can only react to, not participate in. Thus, spectacle thrives under a system that instills reactive, and passive modes of thought, such as the social.

In her essay "Lying in Politics," Arendt addresses a phenomenon similar to spectacle that she calls "image making." Writing in response to the Pentagon Papers, Arendt analyzes ideologizing and defactualization, deception and self-deception in American politics. Arendt views the revelations of the Pentagon Papers as the inevitable failures of professional

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[105] Bruce Miroff, "The Presidential Spectacle," in *The Presidency and the Political System*, ed. Michael Nelson, 11th ed. (Congressional Quarterly, 2018), 232.

"problem-solvers" and technocrats addressing foreign policy like a think tank game theory

simulation. She writes;

> It is not surprising that the recent generation of intellectuals, who grew up in the insane
> atmosphere of rampant advertising and were taught that half of politics is "image
> making" and the other half the art of making people believe in the imagery, should almost
> automatically fall back on the older adages of carrot and stick whenever the situation
> becomes too serious for theory.[106]

Here Arendt links the rise of advertising, a product of mass media under the social, with the

devolution of politics into "image making" and manipulation. In this style of politics, there are

few options if policy questions cannot be assuaged by image and spectacle. This explains the

constantly shifting objectives and strategies in the case of Vietnam. The series of failed

short-term solutions were not for the sake of a substantive policy effort, but to maintain

America's image and convince the public to, as Miroff says, "become absorbed in [the]

spectacle." Arendt's analysis of the Pentagon Papers show that under the social, politics devolves

into image and spectacle. And while image and spectacle are initially used to communicate

policy, the substance of policy eventually devolves into image as well.

For Arendt, the Pentagon Papers is also an example of deception and self-deception in

politics. In this case, however, deception did not end with self-deception. Rather, the deceivers

(technocrats and "problem solvers" manipulating image as a form of policy) began with

self-deception. Politics under the social fosters self-deception. Arendt writes, "The internal world

of government, with its bureaucracy on one hand, its social life on the other, made self-deception

relatively easy."[107]As previously stated, bureaucracy isolates the individual within a larger

structure. And within that structure, bureaucracy can impose a sensation of reality that is not

based in fact. Information passed down the hierarchy of administrative bureaucracy can easily

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[106] Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers." *The New York Review,* November 18, 1971.
[107] Arendt, "Lying in Politics."

deceive, because bureaucracy can naturally insulate itself from factual truth. Arendt says that

self-deception and remoteness from reality, both symptoms of and contributors to the social, are

especially dangerous in politics.

> Self-deception still pre-supposes a distinction between truth and falsehood, between fact and fantasy, which disappears in an entirely defactualized mind. In the realm of politics, where secrecy and deliberate deception have always played a significant role, self-deception is the danger par excellence; the self-deceived deceiver loses all contact, not only with his audience but with the real world which will catch up with him, as he can remove only his mind from it and not his body.[108]

The self-deceived deceiver is mentally situated in an alternate version of reality, one in which a

distinction between truth and falsehood cannot be made. People living under bureaucracy and

falsehood are floating in the system, because the decisions they make are not based in factual

reality. The aim is to manipulate the public into believing deception justified by falsehood.

Spectacle and image making are the most efficient channels of manipulation, because the aim of

manipulation (the public's perspective of reality) is most effectively swayed by projected images

that have static, untouchable messages.

Spectacle thrives on social media. In online political discourse, spectacle reverses the

way administration influences politics. Per Arendt's understanding of administration, technocrats

become too focused on the technical problems and do not consider the ultimate ends of their

decisions. The bigger questions of principle and trajectory are passed over for short-term,

detailed problem solving and cleaning up messes. However, on the Internet, the opposite

happens. That is, language and communication have been flattened into image and spectacle, and

as a result, online discourse cannot adequately sustain discussions about technical policy

questions. Diving into policy details is not sustainable on the Internet. But impassioned

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[108] Arendt, "Lying in Politics."

discussion about what motivates politics–principles, morals, desires, grievances, feuds–are served very well by social media's design.

Social media thrives on impassioned politics and spectacle because that is what drives the attention economy. The attention economy attempts to attract as many eyes as possible. The ultimate goal is to capitalize on our attention. This is bad for politics because the attention economy encourages passions over rational discourse. Politics built on spectacle has been an established column of American democracy, arguably since the Reagan administration. But the impassioned tone of political discourse has intensified since the introduction of social media as a political tool, culminating in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Donald Trump's presidency. In an article for *the Guardian*, Paul Lewis writes, "The attention economy itself is set up to promote a phenomenon like Trump, who is masterly at grabbing and retaining the attention of supporters and critics alike, often by exploiting or creating outrage."[109] In my view, considering the attention economy and politics in the age of social media as an extension of the social illuminates the confounding nature of Trump's presidency and the pinnacle of his politics: the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

At the time of writing this conclusion, the insurrection exists as a historical political event that we have yet to fully understand. But the ultimate failure of the insurrection, and the spectacular nature of that failure, ought to make us question the use of social media and online message boards as a pseudo public realm. The insurrection illustrates what can happen when planning a rebellion against a regime (the classic Arendtian example of political action, people gathering together to generate political power in the name of founding something new), is

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[109] Paul Lewis, "'Our minds can be hijacked': the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia," TheGuardian.com, Guardian News & Media Limited, October 6, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia.

sabotaged by the virtual space. The result was documented and broadcast around the world: not an Arendtian political community generating power in plurality and using persuasion to found something new, but a mob drawing strength from uniform allegiance to false claims and using violence and brute force in an attempt to physically overwhelm a formerly constituted public realm (the U.S. Congress). I believe the insurrection can be viewed as an attempted political action that was conceived, organized, and implemented through spectacle. The attackers at the Capitol, in voluntarily documenting and sharing their experiences on social media, made spectacles of themselves as a way of communicating brute force, rather than power in the Arendtian sense. This is indicative of how discourse has devolved into spectacle in the age of social media.

The question is, how do we salvage selfhood and create a more functional virtual public realm? Are there conceptions of agonistic and associational space that could stand outside the social? The Internet has positive potential as a tool of communication that has expanded the possibilities of the public realm. But this potential is corrupted as elements of the Arendtian social extend into social media. In my view, creating a functional public realm on the Internet begins with recovering what social media has obscured: the distinction between public and private, human influence (as opposed to the "no man rule" of algorithms and market structures), and forms of communication that do not have to rely on fragmented symbolic meaning and spectacle. In order to achieve this, human agency must be reclaimed in creating and engaging with these technological platforms. As the virtual space has expanded, more faith has been placed in the technology of these platforms than in our own agency. As life becomes increasingly organized around computational technology's inherent limitations, we dig ourselves deeper into a paradox of power and helplessness. My vision of a healthy public realm online would be founded

on person-to-person interaction, and would resist constant mediation and surveillance by algorithms and markets. Digital presentations of ourselves would not be commodified, and privacy would be protected by separating the personal from one's actions as a citizen online. Whether this model of public space would be able to resist profit motives and abstraction through bureaucracy, however, is a question for a future paper.

Reflecting on this project, I feel that the most insidious symptom of social media as an extension of the social is its threat to natality. In filtering selfhood through rigid, standardized platforms, we come to view ourselves and each other reductively. What I find to be so valuable in Arendt's work is the significance she places on natality. We appear in the world as a distinct someone, which is truly extraordinary. But on social media, we readily sacrifice our extraordinariness to create standardized identities for ourselves, all in the name of being seen. I do not chastise the social media user for chasing this desire to be seen. As Arendt says, we want to be seen, and how wonderful it is to be recognized for existing. But I believe that clinging to social media to receive such recognition is the most efficient, yet least fulfilling path.

Social media is a system of channels through which we may receive recognition, but it is important to remain adamantly aware that "likes" do not affirm appearance. People do. And by placing faith in the platform as opposed to the people on it, as Lanier writes, "You then start to care about the abstraction of the network more than the real people who are networked even though the network by itself is meaningless. Only the people were ever meaningful."[110] On this point, I believe Arendt's wish to return our focus back to what creates meaning–people living in plurality in a world held in common–remains relevant. Navigating the ever-expanding virtual space without losing our grasp on identity, connection, and common worldliness demands what Arendt set out to do in *The Human Condition*: "to think what we are doing."

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[110] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget,* 17.

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