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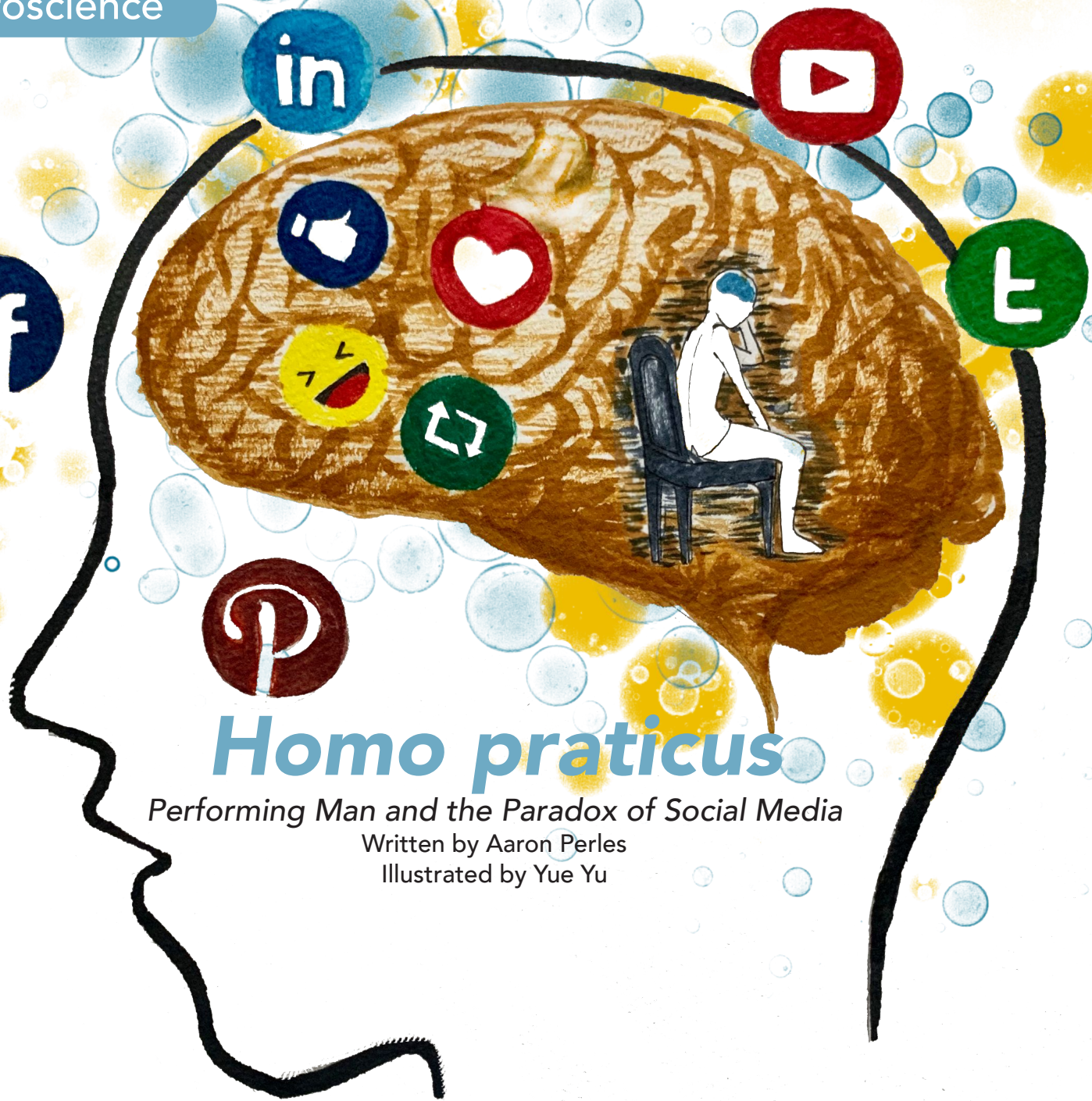
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Homo practicus

Performing Man and the Paradox of Social Media

Written by Aaron Perles

Illustrated by Yue Yu

Blaise Pascal was remarkably ahead of his time when he said, “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” The 17th century French polymath had no access to the tools of modern genetics, evolutionary theory, or psychology, but his insights shed light on a fundamental character of our existence that once eluded behavioral scientists for decades: the sociality of *Homo sapiens*.

It has been historically assumed that humans’ social behavior—that is, our tendency to band together and live in cooperative societies—was an evolved trait. Charles Darwin himself broached this idea in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, but never made it past a lukewarm guess as to why that might be. It wasn’t until a century later that biologists such as John Maynard Smith, Richard Dawkins, and Robert Trivers studied real-world examples of game theory and proposed a mechanism of “reciprocal altruism,” in which individuals cooperate

in one-on-one interactions for the sake of mutual self interest. We evolved to rely on others for our own survival, and to provide for others in return. Mutual reliance gave rise to mutual recognition: not just physical discernment, but a deeply personal sense of recognizing each other as humans; today, we call this empathy. After 200,000 years of cooperating in this way, this recognition has become so ingrained in our minds that it is nearly inescapable. It seems that no matter our environment or upbringing, this key facet of human nature remains: a desire to see and be seen by the people around us.

The human brain is an inherently social organ. Its capabilities for facial recognition, facial memory, and interpersonal bonding are among the highest in the animal kingdom. The human brain doesn’t just want to be around others, it needs to be. We also know what happens when that need is not met. We know that depriving others of all human interaction causes psychological distress because this isolation does not mesh with our social nature. There is no better

evidence for this than the psychological effects of solitary confinement, which include anxiety, depression, anger, perceptual distortions, obsessive thoughts, paranoia, psychosis, and a propensity for self-harm—we literally cannot sit quietly in a room alone. But what if we took this to the other extreme? Can there be such a thing as being too social that causes the same kind of distress?

The answer seems to have come in our modern age. In the Paleolithic era, our social circles were limited to those in our immediate surroundings—a small village, a larger tribe at most. The explosion of communications technology in the last seven decades though, has expanded our social circles to countless people across unfathomable distances. Television, while considered utterly banal now, was marveled at in the 1950s for its ability to beam strangers into our living rooms. The Internet was once the province of governments and scientists, but had its access expanded for personal use in the 1990s, enabling communication with entire Web-based communities oceans away. And, of course, the advent of the now ubiquitous social media site, starting in 2004, practically forces us to digest an

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endless stream of voices whenever we want to keep in touch with friends, read the news, or even indulge in mindless entertainment. Comments on public social media posts number in the thousands or tens of thousands; if we tally the number of such posts one comes across over the course of a day, or a week, we approach a number of voices in the millions. We may not hear them all, but we know they're there. Compared to our Stone Age ancestors, we appear to be more social than ever before.

Here's our problem, though. We were never meant to be exposed to these levels of human interaction. In 1993, the Oxford evolutionary psychologist Robin I.M. Dunbar brought together anthropological evidence, non-human primate populations, and human brain size to calculate the size of the average Paleolithic human society. He surmised that these societies were likely about 150 people, a number determined by the size of the human brain and its large, albeit finite, capacity for social engagement. That's the environment we evolved in for 200,000 years. Modern communications technologies, on the other hand, have been around for roughly 70 years, which is to say, less than four ten-thousandths of all human history. Imagine spending eight years getting comfortable in a four-person household, and then suddenly, over the course of a day, your family explodes into 80,000. That's how rapidly modernity has expanded the scope of our social interaction, with the number of social media users projected at 2.77 million by 2019. Technology has outpaced our brain's capacity for facial recognition and sociality, and has done so in too short a time for us to adapt to it.

It should be no surprise, then, that a myriad of psychological detriments have been associated with excessive social media use. Just as totally cutting us off from human contact clashes with our evolved nature, so does bombarding us with it, yielding the same kinds of destructive consequences. Numerous studies have reported increased loneliness, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem among social media users, especially young people. At the same time, real-

world social engagement has gone down among social media users, cutting people off from important support networks like family, peer groups, and religious communities. These consequences strongly resemble the colloquial truism of "millennial disaffection," and this double-whammy of increased social media use and decreased face-to-face interactions may account for it.

The question then becomes, Why? What is it about being surrounded by too many people in our new digital environment that messes up our psychology so much? Well, it all comes back to that key facet of human nature: a desire to see and be seen by the people around us. They may be faceless, they may be behind a screen, but we still see a human behind every Facebook profile or Twitter handle, the same way we would see members of our own primordial social group. It tricks our brains into believing that the millions of strangers we encounter on social media are all supposed to be members of our tribe, people that we must provide for in some way, and who must be watching us the same way we watch them. But when met with massive swaths of people thousands of miles away from us, whom we have no way of serving in any tangible way and who don't care one way or the other about us, the impulses that our brains produce are left unfulfilled.

Just like when we don't respond to a fight-or-flight instinct with any form of action, leaving our social instincts unfulfilled causes stress hormones to accumulate in the brain. An undue onus is put upon us, not only to provide for the countless individuals watching us, but also to seek their recognition and validation. This is an onus that our primordial brains are simply not equipped to handle. The perception that the whole world is watching you creates an all too familiar "spotlight effect," but we cannot entertain our supposed audience. And for the new, social media-oriented humanity that we might call *Homo praticus*—"performing man"—the inability to perform destroys any semblance of purpose this new species might have in this world. The pathologies of *Homo praticus* are almost identical to what psychologist James Masterson described as "covert narcissism," when our inability to stand out among an indefinite number of peers creates a deflated and unflattering sense of self. Covert narcissists, being constantly focused on themselves and others' perceptions of them, are less adept at reaching out to others and making genuine human connections. Suddenly, the association between social media and social isolation—as well as the clichéd characterization of millennials as a generation of narcissists—starts to make a little more sense.

This is not meant to insinuate that all social media users are narcissistic, nor is it meant to indict the character of "millennials," for it is dependant on how much credence we should lend that term as a legitimate category. Rather, my intention is to show that social media can impact our psychological makeup, and our societies at large, using mechanisms already deeply embedded within our biological nature. Oftentimes, there are no bright lines separating biological, psychological, and sociological phenomena. Each gives rise to the other and can influence each other in ways that are infinitely complex. In my view, this leaves us with a very clear imperative: if we want to structure our societies in ways that maximize well-being for everyone, then we have to do so in a way that satisfies our evolved intuitions. We have to channel our primordial urges and effectively translate them into 21st century scenarios. Social media is an invention of the last two decades that we were not prepared for as a species. If we learn to use it in a healthy way, however, we may be able to turn it into one of our most powerful tools in the development of human societies—the next way we avoid having to sit quietly in a room alone. ● ● ●